



**SHOTOKAN**

**MYSTERIES**

松濤館の謎

*The Hidden Answers to the*

*Secrets of Shotokan Karate*

**KOUSAKU YOKOTA**

横田 耕作

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## DEDICATION



I dedicate this book to the memory of my parents;  
Father, Kimio Yokota (1916-2001)  
Mother, Fujiko Yokota (1922-2010)  
They gave me a healthy body and taught me honor and pride.



## KOUSAKU YOKOTA BIO



Shihan Kousaku Yokota, 8<sup>th</sup> dan, is a martial artist with extensive experience. With 50 years of training in Shotokan karate, he specializes in Asai ryu Budo karate. Moreover, his wide range of experience also includes training in Kobudo, specializing in the ways of the Nunchaku, and training in the art of Ki and the breathing method by Nishino ryu Kikojutsu.

Shihan Yokota started his martial arts training with Judo when he was 13 years old. Three years later, he joined the JKA affiliated dojo in his hometown of Kobe, Japan, and started his long journey in Shotokan karate. He trained under the late Master Sugano, 9th dan JKA Vice Chairman, and completed his instructors' training in 1982. In 2002, he followed the late Master Tetsuhiko Asai and joined his organization, JKS, where he stayed until 2009.

Currently Shihan Yokota holds the position of Technical Director at WJKA ([www.wjkaHQ.com](http://www.wjkaHQ.com)), and travels extensively around the world to share the knowledge and techniques of Asai ryu karate. He is also the partner of Karate Coaching ([www.karatecoaching.com](http://www.karatecoaching.com)) where he extends his karate teaching using internet media. He is the author of Shotokan Myths (2010) and the co-author of Kata Kyohon Vol. 1, 2 and 3 (2011-2012). He is a regular contributor to martial arts magazines; Shotokan Karate Magazine, Masters, and Classical Fighting Arts. When he is in town he teaches at his dojo, Byakkokan Dojo, in Japan-town of San Jose California.



## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

To create this second book, Shotokan Mysteries, once again many people are responsible for making it possible. I want to extend my gratitude to all those who so generously contributed their time and experience to the creation of this book and all those who purchased this book.

I dedicate this book to my parents who are no longer with us in this world. I want to thank them for giving me a life and an unbelievably healthy body. I have never seen a doctor or been in a hospital for being sick. They also taught me to be independent and be proud. I also want to thank the cultural heritage of Japan and Shotokan Karatedo as they taught me honor and respect.

A deep thanks to Shihan Jan Knobel and his wife, Hanny Knobel. Sensei Knobel, President of WJKA, is not only my partner but also a motivator of my karate training. He trains every day alone in the neighborhood woods. He shares my strong belief that karate is not for talking (kuchi waza) but for doing. He motivates me and we set the bar higher for each other's karate.

A word of appreciation is due to Phillip Kim who helped me with the creation of the cover page for my first book, Shotokan Myths and again with this book.

Bev Yu, Guy Coulston, Mary Boochever and Tim Ryan were kind enough to do the tedious proof reading of my poor writing.

I would like to give my sincere thanks to all my instructors and students, past and present, for giving me the understanding and knowledge of this great karate style of Shotokan. As Master Funakoshi said "Karate training is a life time endeavor". I am still training and learning every day, yet I have not seen the summit of karate. In the past I learned from my sensei and my senpai. Today, though my sensei have passed, my students and other karate-ka are my new teachers. Without all of you my karate would not be where it is today and this book could probably not materialize.

I also want to thank you, the reader of this book. I hope you will enjoy reading it as much as I did writing it. I also hope that I will get to meet you and train together in the future. The true enjoyment of karate is to do (practice) it. I am dreaming of a day when all the Shotokan practitioners can train together without worrying about the politics. On that day, Funakoshi sensei and Asai sensei will be truly pleased.

From the bottom of my heart, I want to say, "Thank you very much to all of you. 皆様に心より御礼申し上げます。"

# **FOREWORD**

## **BY JOHN TURNBULL PHD**

WJKA Shihankai member, Sixth Dan

Chief Instructor: Aikenkai Shotokan Karatedo Federation

Member of the Executive Board, American Federation of Martial Arts  
Southampton, New York

While Kousaku Yokota-shihan's new book, SHOTOKAN MYSTERIES, stands on its own, it is nevertheless the companion piece to his 2010 book, SHOTOKAN MYTHS, in several important ways. The content of the books is different, and the specific goals of the books are not the same. However, both books share the larger objective of unraveling and clearing up—demystifying—misconceptions and erroneous thinking about Shotokan Karate. There is so much misinformation in the public domain now about Shotokan Karate and the martial arts in general, that interested lay people and even curious, diligent practitioners might not be able to separate fact from fiction, or have the correct information to create a working context for their questions and assumptions. Yokota-shihan's purpose in SHOTOKAN MYSTERIES, as in SHOTOKAN MYTHS, is providing the reader with an informed, balanced perspective from the inside. Yokota-shihan is in a unique position to do this.

Born in Kobe, Japan in 1947, Yokota-shihan came to the United States as a student when he was in his early twenties. He returned to Japan in 1981 to complete his instructor's training, and in 1983 settled in the San Francisco Bay area. Having lived, trained, studied, worked and taught in both Japan and the United States, Yokota-shihan is well-placed to see what in Japanese culture supports the values of karatedo and what information and understandings about karatedo are so deeply integrated into the larger Japanese cultural fabric that little needs to be overtly analyzed, explained and clarified to the extent that he has here. Yet, Yokota-shihan has lived long enough in the West, and has spent such a full, active and socially engaged life outside of his home culture, that he understands very well the absence of context abroad for Shotokan Karate, and he anticipates the sorts of questions Westerners might have about it. There is much in Western societies that runs counter to the culture of karatedo, and this makes confusion, misinterpretation, misunderstanding and cultural superimposition inevitable. Indeed, Yokota-shihan's task is to act as a cultural translator to allow the Western reader to better know the many and deep relationships between Japanese culture and history and the history, traditions and practice of Shotokan Karate. In this sense, SHOTOKAN MYSTERIES acts as a guide or compass for the Western reader so that he or she might be assisted in opening his or her thinking in order that new ideas and questions might be formulated. This is a generative book, one not meant to close down discussion through final judgments or an opaque reliance on unexamined tradition, but rather intended to open discussion and create context for critical thinking to take place.

Yokota-shihan does this in a number of ways. In chapters such as "Funakoshi's New Techniques" and "The Mysteries of Heian Kata", Yokota-shihan delves into karate history and lore. The author shares his many years of research findings with us. In "Why Uchi Uke?", "Mikazuki Geri, An Extinct Kick", and "Heian Bunkai Mysteries" the author analyzes the derivation, application and evolution of specific karate techniques. In the chapters "Does Shotokan Lack Circular Movements", "Straight Techniques in Circular Movements", and "Unstable Balance", Yokota-shihan discusses kinetic and dynamic principles. And in "Karate Master" and "Shu Ha Ri" the author engages budo philosophy and psychology. There is variety in his subject matter and approach, and the writing is clear, unadorned and straightforward. It can be read, understood and appreciated by many audiences: the lay person, the curious parent of a child practitioner, the karate novice looking for a conceptual framework, or the advanced student committed to refining his or her understanding of karatedo. SHOTOKAN MYSTERIES is inclusive and accessible, with the virtue of being as simple as possible without being overly simple.

Last, the author is not oriented from a fixed or ideological standpoint, and this book does not

read like a set of school house doctrines. Rather, Yokota-shihan is analytical, open and pragmatic as a thinker, and his approach to his subjects is tactical and operational. The strict reliance on the history and practices of tradition itself will not satisfactorily answer questions that arise in a contemporary, global culture such as Shotokan Karate now finds itself—unmoored from the original common understandings and shared assumptions. The old admonition to simply not question much but “train harder and more” until understanding emerges in due course, even if well-intentioned and the traditionally appropriate method for delivering content and pointing toward the slow accretion and refinement of consciousness, seems detached, out of touch, elitist and unrealistic in the world we live in now. Interpretation, translation and facilitation—responsible guidance—has become increasingly more necessary.

This book, SHOTOKAN MYSTERIES, is a responsible guide. It is an excellent and valuable addition to any martial arts bookshelf or library, and a must for sincere students of Shotokan Karate.

# **FOREWORD**

## **BY ROBERTO EISENMANN III**

My close friend,  
WUKO President Panama (2010-2012)  
Panama City, Panama

Contados son en el mundo que nos ha tocado vivir, quienes aún al haber llegado a la cima, mantienen su cabeza en posición regular, y hasta con una ligera inclinación hacia abajo; si miran hacia arriba, es para continuar buscando aprender y perfeccionarse, y para agradecer a Dios, jamás por arrogancia; y miran hacia abajo, pues la humildad es parte intrínseca de su ser.

El Karate debe ser el arte que nos lleva, en la vida real, a enfrentar las vicisitudes con tenacidad y determinación, a evitar confrontaciones, a ser nobles en vez de agresivos, a respetar a los demás. El Karate nos debe reforzar el carácter y el alma. Encuentro del todo sublime, haber tenido el privilegio de encontrarme en el camino a alguien que además de haber nacido en un sitio privilegiado por sus costumbres ancestrales en torno a los valores antes aludidos, vive su vida, y el Karate, como una sola y de esa manera. En su guía, he encontrado luz, serenidad, alivio, fe y esperanza. Mas allá de lo técnico, el fortalecimiento espiritual fundamentado en una filosofía sencilla y de un enaltecimiento exquisito, se hace relevante en el verdadero camino del Budo.

Su primer libro "Shotokan Myths" es digno de formar parte de la librería personal de cualquier legítimo artista marcial y/o Dojo, para leerse a través del tiempo varias veces; este segundo, aun mas. Levanto una taza hecha en hierro forjado, rellena de té verde japonés, y me inclino, con merecido respeto y humildad, ante la majestuosidad del Maestro Yokota.

### **(English version)**

"In the world that we have had to live, there are very few dedicated instructors who admit to have yet reached the top of their art. They keep their head in a normal position, even with a slight tilt downwards, and only look up to learn more, improve themselves and thank God. They carry themselves with no arrogance, and continue to look downward with humility as an intrinsic part of their being.

Karate should be the art that helps us face hardships in life with tenacity and determination. We should use this art as a guiding light to avoid confrontations and be noble rather than aggressive through the respect of others. Karate must be used to strengthen our character and soul. I find it quite sublime to have the privilege of finding someone who, in addition to being born in a place privileged by their ancestral customs based on the aforementioned values, lives his life and Karate as one.

Under Shihan's guidance, I have found light, serenity, relief, faith and hope. In addition to the strictly technical side, I have found my spirit strengthened based on his simple philosophy in Budo Karate. His first book, "Shotokan Myths", deserves to be a part of any legitimate martial artist's personal library and/or Dojo, to be read over the years at various times. This second book of his deserves to be read and preserved even more so.

I lift a cast iron cup, filled with Japanese green tea and incline myself, with well-deserved respect and humility before Shihan Yokota's majesty.

# **FOREWORD**

## **FERNANDO ROCHA**

President, CKIB, Nana (7) dan  
WJKA Brazil Representative  
Aracaju, Brazil

É norma consagrada entre os autores que suas publicações sejam prefaciadas por pessoas merecedoras de especial consideração e apreço.

Quando o conteúdo é de alto nível científico, como acontece nesse caso, o prefácio não tem maior alcance e a escolha do autor não foi senão um gesto de amizade excessiva, pelo qual agradeço a deferência.

Ao prefaciар uma obra, penso que se deve considerar o assunto, o livro e o autor.

No Karatê moderno, o assunto mais generalizado é sem dúvida a falta da parte teórica na didática do ensino e, esse assunto sem dúvida irá enriquecer os nossos conhecimentos através de grandes obras literárias como essa.

O livro apresenta particularidades e pormenores sobre o assunto de ampla magnitude, que visa atender as necessidades do corpo docente e discente na aprendizagem do Karatê-Dô. Em linguagem clara e precisa, como convém assuntos científicos, os temas sucedem-se numa sequência natural e procedente.

O autor é uma autoridade no assunto. Autoridades técnicas não se improvisam, são condicionadas por formação específica, resultantes de qualidades intelectuais, e do ambiente próprio ao estudo e desenvolvimento da Arte. Com inúmeras credenciais, o autor milita no Karatê-Dô há muitos anos, preocupando-se com o estudo e desenvolvimento do tema.

Vejo, com muita satisfação, o merecido sucesso do Shihan Yokota, K.

### **(English version)**

Usually the authors invite people who deserve respect and consideration to recommend their publications.

I thank the author for indicating my name which I consider it a friendship gesture.

I believe the subject matter discussed in this great literary work will enrich our knowledge of Karate. The book provides details on this great subject, meeting the needs of all interested in learning KarateDo: instructors or students of the subject.

Using a clear and precise language, the themes succeed in a natural and logical sequence.

The author is an authority on the subject. We cannot improvise Technical Authorities, they come by specific training, resulting from intellectual qualities, and the environment itself to the study and development of Art.

With numerous credentials, the author has been working in Karatedo for many years, concerned with the study and development of the theme.

I believe, with great satisfaction, in the well-deserved success of Shihan Yokota.



# FOREWORD

## BY MARCUS HINSCHBERGER

President & Founder Karate Coaching  
JKA Sandan  
Sacramento, California

Sich selbst in Frage zu stellen und *“sein eigenes Glas halb leer zu lassen für neues Wissen”*, dieser Gedanke ist Teil der Zen-Philosophie (Shoshin—sich den Geist eines Anfängers bewahren).

Jeder Karateka, der KarateDo wahrhaftig begreifen will, sollte diesem Weg folgen.

In der oft recht “dogmatischen” Karateszene ist Shihan Yokota einer der wenigen Großmeister, der eigenständige Trainings—und Denkansätze vertritt, Überliefertes zu hinterfragen wagt und seine Schüler zu selbständigem Suchen, Forschen und Ausprobieren anhält.

Der tägliche Karate-Trainingsablauf wird durch Shihan Yokota’s Trainingsansätze und seine spezielle Herangehensweise aufgebrochen und erfrischend neu gestaltet.

Er ermuntert seine Schüler und Freunde, sich dieser Haltung anzuschliessen und eigenen Ideen, Vorstellungen und Denkansätzen unbedingt zu folgen.

Als Mensch, Lehrer und Vorbild ist Shihan Yokota bescheiden, freundlich und absolut ehrlich.

Seine Lehrgänge bieten einen erfrischend neuen Zugang zu Karate, seine Bücher zeigen längst in Vergessenheit geratene oder noch verborgene Ansätze und Ideen des Karate. Seine Beiträge, wie z.B. im Blog von *KarateCoaching.com*, sind provokativ, interaktiv und ermuntern zum freimütigen Gedanken—und Erfahrungsaustausch.

Sich Shihan Yokota anzuschliessen, führt daher unweigerlich zur Begegnung und Auseinandersetzung mit neuen Ideen, einer tieferen Einsicht in KarateDo, die Kata, das Bunkai und erweitert den Einblick in die Geschichte des Karate.

Ich kann Shihan Yokota’s Bücher nicht nur empfehlen, sondern ermuntere jeden Karateka geradezu, den Kontakt mit diesem Großmeister zu suchen. Die Kommunikation mit ihm wirkt stets inspirierend und endet vielleicht sogar in einer echten Schüler/Meister Bindung.

Ich bin überzeugt, dass der Leser dieses Buch mit großem Interesse lesen wird. Viel Spass bei der Lektüre!

### **(English version)**

John F Kennedy once said, “Too often we enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.” This statement is very true for what is going on within the Karate world for decades now. Unfortunately people tend to prefer dogma over perspective thinking and questioning. This is evident within the Karate realm as well, and has not only left us with many highly doubtable Bunkai applications and explanations but also questionable behaviors by some instructors, watered down competition and more and more the loss of budo which is the essence of Karate.

In this world of masters, grand masters and grand-grand masters, Shihan Yokota is one of the very few who dares to think for himself, encourages his own students and followers to think for themselves and is willing not only to question but also to break up dogmatic beliefs. At the same time he manages to stay humble, approachable and honest.

His seminars offer a fresh point of view, his books reveal lost or hidden ideas, his blog posts for example on *KarateCoaching* are interactive, engaging and thought provoking to the readers. Following Shihan Yokota will lead you to a wider perspective in your Karate beliefs about certain techniques, Kata or Kata application or even about Karate history and Karate politics, thus deepening your insight on what you already know about karate. Questioning oneself and “keeping the glass empty” is part of Zen—the beginner’s mind (Shoshin) and every Karateka who truly wants to understand KarateDo must travel this path. I can not only recommend Shihan Yokota’s writings but I also want to encourage any Karateka around the world to seek contact with Shihan. Communicating with and following him will be inspirational and not surprisingly may lead into a lasting student/sensei relationship.

I am sure you will enjoy this book.



# FOREWORD

## BY LELAND VANDERVORT

Sandan, JKA France  
Paris, France

Yokota Kousaku Shihan est un formidable représentant des Arts Martiaux et plus particulièrement du Karaté Shotokan, avec plus de 40 ans de pratique et d'enseignement.

Il prend en compte non seulement la technique, mais il met au tout premier rang de son enseignement les résonnances historiques et philosophiques du Karaté comme bases de son enseignement.

Au-delà de la simple analyse de l'action, en donnant des points de vue différents de la technique, il ouvre ainsi la voie vers une recherche intérieure des applications alternatives plus poussées des techniques de Kata.

Dans son livre "Shotokan Myths", Shihan Yokota mettait en lumière des techniques et applications que beaucoup de maîtres de Karaté ont cherché à garder secrètes pendant des décennies, et permettait au lecteur de découvrir ces concepts inédits afin de l'aider dans sa recherche personnelle.

Dans cette nouvelle étude, "Shotokan Mysteries", Shihan Yokota explore et délivre, au-delà de la technique, des questions essentielles de notre pratique du karaté et à partir de cette nouvelle étape, soulève de nouvelles questions ...

### **(English version)**

Shihan Kousaku Yokota is a formidable proponent of the martial arts, and especially of Shotokan Karate, with more than forty years of practice and instruction. His insight into not only the technique but also the historical and philosophical aspect of Karate is in the forefront of his teaching; not simply a case of what to do, but giving alternative viewpoints for the techniques opening the way for an in-depth search for alternative applications for techniques and kata.

In his first book, "Shotokan Myths", Shihan Yokota exposes techniques and applications that many of the well-known karate masters have tried to keep hidden for decades, while at the same time leaving some of these concepts open for the reader to discover through personal research.

In this new work, "Shotokan Mysteries", Shihan Yokota goes beyond the realms of technique, but into the "what, where and why" of our practice of karate. From this new stage, he raises new questions ...

# FOREWORD

## PROF. ME. TIAGO OVIEDO FROSI

Mestre em Ciências do Movimento Humano, Bacharel em Educação Física  
Professor de Karate Shotokan do Shinjigenkan Dojo  
Porto Alegre, Brazil

Conheci recentemente o Shihan Kousaku Yokota. Mesmo assim nossas conversas e o treinamento que fizemos no final de 2012 na Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul me fizeram admirar esse professor. Sua força de vontade e simpatia ao ensinar me causaram grande e positiva surpresa.

Nesse mesmo encontro tive a oportunidade de obter um exemplar de *Shotokan Myths*, o primeiro livro do mestre Yokota, que trata de vários pontos polêmicos da técnica e da história do Karate Shotokan. Neste livro, além de discutir pontos que muitos evitam discutir (como por exemplo, o problema de muitas aplicações “tradicionais” dos kata não serem efetivas, e o fato de existirem aplicações dos mesmos golpes que são muito mais realistas).

Shihan Yokota também está muito consciente de pontos importantes da história do KarateDo que não são muito divulgados no ocidente. Como pesquisador da história do esporte, percebi que além de conhecer essa história, Shihan Yokota procura em muitos momentos fazer o exercício da reflexão e encontrar hipóteses para responder aos seus pontos em branco. Muitas das hipóteses por ele levantadas estão disponíveis em seu livro *Shotokan Myths* e muitas outras reflexões por ele formuladas deverão estar registradas em seu novo livro, *Shotokan Mysteries*. Em nossas conversas pude perceber que Shihan Yokota tem uma mente bastante aberta, provavelmente pela sua vinda muito cedo para os Estados Unidos. Viver em países tão distantes e ao mesmo tempo com culturas tão diversas dá a qualquer homem a possibilidade de ampliar muitos de seus paradigmas e visão de mundo. Shihan Yokota demonstra que tirou grande proveito para sua vida dessa oportunidade em particular. Nesse sentido, pude perceber que diferente de muitos outros professores japoneses, o mestre Yokota estava muito mais aberto ao diálogo, o que permite àqueles que com ele travam contato a possibilidade de aprofundar muito mais as ideias de um autor de nossa área, tão pouco explorada em termos de estudos históricos e técnicos mais detalhados, que são as artes marciais e em especial o KarateDo.

Pensando especificamente em nosso estilo de KarateDo, o Shotokan, penso que precisamos lembrar aqueles que dedicaram suas vidas a desenvolver e divulgar essa estilo e essa arte. Lembramos de Gichin Funakoshi sensei, o pai do Karate moderno e aquele que introduziu a arte oquinauense no Japão, e de tantos outros professores importantes que o seguiram, como: Masatoshi Nakayama, Shigeru Egami, Mitsusuke Harada, Teruyuki Okazaki, Hidetaka Nishiyama, Tetsuhiko Asai, Taiji Kase, Keinosuke Enoda, Hiroshi Shirai, Hirokazu Kanazawa, Masaaki Ueki, Yoshiharu Osaka, Mikio Yahara, Masahiko Tanaka, Masao Kagawa e tantos outros que podem não estar aqui citados mas não são menos importantes. Os instigantes textos de *Shotokan Myths*, e certamente a maioria das ideias de *Shotokan Mysteries* giram em torno da tradição estruturada pelo trabalho de tantos formidáveis karateka que, como os citados acima, continuam nos inspirando e ensinando, seja pelo exemplo de vida, seja pelo legado técnico e filosófico deixado.

Recebi a notícia da publicação deste novo livro do Shihan Kousaku Yokota, *Shotokan Mytseries* com grande satisfação, pois é uma nova oportunidade de ampliarmos o debate entre professores e praticantes desses pontos polêmicos ou inexplorados na técnica e na história do KarateDo. Pontos os quais às vezes evitamos pela complexidade, por nossa falta de vontade de estudar ou mesmo pela falta de oportunidade de entrar em contato com ideias diferentes daquelas que aprendemos pela “tradição oral” dos nossos Dojo. Enfim, convido você, leitor, para mergulhar em *Shotokan Mysteries* com a mente aberta. Concordando ou não com o ponto de vista de Shihan Yokota, os textos são uma ótima motivação ao exercício da reflexão, da mesma forma que o são cada um dos capítulos de *Shotokan Myths*.

**(English version)**

I recently met Shihan Kousaku Yokota. Even so our conversations and training we did in late 2012 at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul made me admire this teacher. His strength of will and kindness to teach caused me great and positive surprise.

At that same meeting I had the opportunity to get a copy of Shotokan Myths, the first book of the master Yokota, which handles several controversial points of technique and history of Shotokan Karate. In this book, and discusses several points avoid discussing (for example, the problem for many applications “traditional” of kata not be effective, and because there are applications of those strokes which are far more realistic).

Shihan Yokota is also very aware of the important points in the history of karate that are not widely reported in the West. As a researcher of the history of the sport, I realized that besides knowing this story, Shihan Yokota demand many times do the exercise of reflection and finding chances to respond to your blank spots. Many of the hypotheses raised by him are available in his book Shotokan Myths and many other reflections made by him shall be recorded in his new book, Mysteries Shotokan. In our conversation I realized that Shihan Yokota has a very open mind, probably too early for his coming to the United States. Living in countries as distant and at the same time with such diverse cultures gives any man the possibility of extending many of its paradigm and worldview. Shihan Yokota shows that took great advantage of this opportunity for your life in particular. In this sense, I realized that unlike many other Japanese teachers, master Yokota was much more open to dialogue, which allows those who hinder contact with him the possibility to deepen more the ideas of an author in our area, so little explored in terms of historical studies and more detailed technical, they are especially martial arts and KarateDo.

Thinking specifically in our style of Karate, Shotokan, I think we need to remember those who have dedicated their lives to developing and disseminating this style and this art. Remember Gichin Funakoshi sensei, the father of modern karate and who introduced the art oquinauense in Japan, and many other important teachers who followed him, such as: Masatoshi Nakayama, Shigeru Egami, Mitsusuke Harada, Teruyuki Okazaki, Hidetaka Nishiyama, Tetsuhiko Asai, Taiji Kase, Keinosuke Enoda, Hiroshi Shirai, Hirokazu Kanazawa, Masaaki Ueki, Yoshiharu Osaka, Mikio Yahara, Masahiko Tanaka, Masao Kagawa and many others that can not be mentioned here but are no less important. The provocative texts Shotokan Myths, and certainly most of the ideas of Shotokan Mysteries revolve around the tradition structured the work of so many formidable karate-ka that, as mentioned above, we continue inspiring and teaching is by example of life, whether the technical and philosophical legacy left.

I received the news of the publication of this new book by Shihan Kousaku Yokota, Shotokan Mytseries with great satisfaction, because it is a new opportunity to broaden the discussion between teachers and practitioners of these unexplored or controversial points in technique and history of KarateDo. Points which sometimes avoided by complexity, by our unwillingness to study or even the lack of opportunity to get in touch with ideas different from those learned by “oral tradition” of our Dojo.

I invite you, the reader, to delve into Shotokan Mysteries with an open mind. Agreeing or not with the view of Shihan Yokota, texts are a great motivation to exercise of reflection, the same way that each of the chapters are Shotokan Myths.

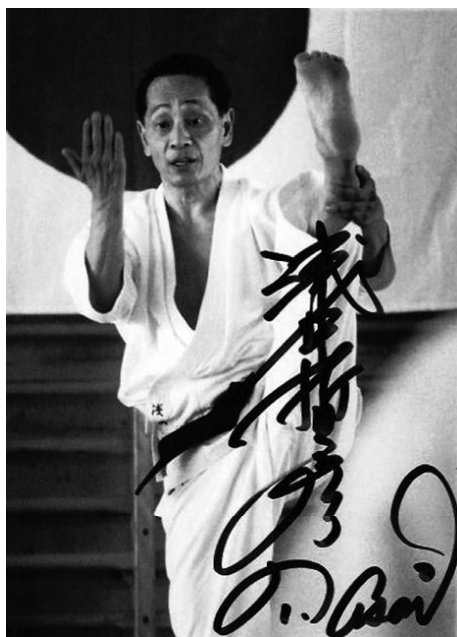
## **PREFACE**

My first book, Shotokan Myths, was published in 2010 and to my great pleasure it has received a lot of positive feedback from many readers. Some sent me emails and told me that this book gave them a different perspective to their training. One called it her karate Bible which almost embarrassed me but felt very honored. Those readers realized there were many “facts” and “truths” that were hidden or taken for granted and those subjects needed to be questioned. They said what I shared in the book made sense. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the readers who took time to read my first book as well as those who purchased this book.

I cannot believe that three years has already passed since the publication of Shotokan Myths. Many have been asking for my second book and I wanted to publish this much sooner but it took three years. Those are very busy years but also exciting and productive ones for me.

During my early years of training I was like those readers who wrote and shared their karate lives with me. I was a diligent and blindly dedicated student so I never questioned. When a sensei said “jump”, my response was “How high?” Of course, the only answer we could give to a sensei in Japan was “Osu”. As I got older I started to have my students and then many questions came to my mind. But I had no place to go or anyone knowledgeable to ask to get the answers so I had to do my own investigation and research. For the first time I started to look into the history of Okinawan karate as well as the teaching of other styles. My interest expanded beyond Karate and my research went into Ki and various Chinese martial arts. I also bought many books on sports medicine, sports coaching and training theories, and kinesiology, as I needed to understand the mechanism of our body and mind first to understand what we do and how we do things with our body. It took me more than 10 years of heavy reading and studying but it was a very interesting journey. It was shocking how I felt after the research but I must confess that the more I learned the less confident I became about the general teaching of Shotokan karate that we find in most of the dojo around the world. In fact, in many of the dojo, it is taught completely incorrect when you consider the mechanism of our body and mind. Even if the common beliefs we learn in a typical dojo happen to be wrong but no one would doubt them. I found the dedicated Shotokan practitioners tend to believe blindly of what they were taught by their sensei. Surprisingly there are many subjects and topics that are almost taboo to discuss them. The practitioners are afraid to even look at them.

Many readers asked me why they never heard of me before. All through my teaching years I had been under the radar or invisible. I declined all the invitations from the publications to write about me including the interviews. I did not seek out the seminars to expose myself. This attitude or a policy changed drastically in 2007 and for two reasons. My sensei, Tetsuhiko Asai passed in 2006. I felt I needed to talk about this great master and to hand down the techniques he left us. Another reason was that I became 60 years old in 2007. I love karate too much to keep what I found only to myself. I felt I have an obligation to share this with all Shotokan practitioners. I am happy to have this opportunity to share my findings and knowledge through this book. I hope what you find here will give you some insight and a motivation to train harder to reach the next goal of your karate journey.



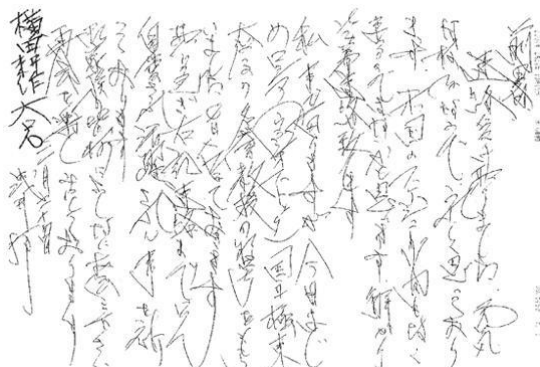
Master Tetsuhiko Asai

浅井 哲彦

Founder of Asai Ryu Karate

1935-2006

## Master Asai's hand written letter

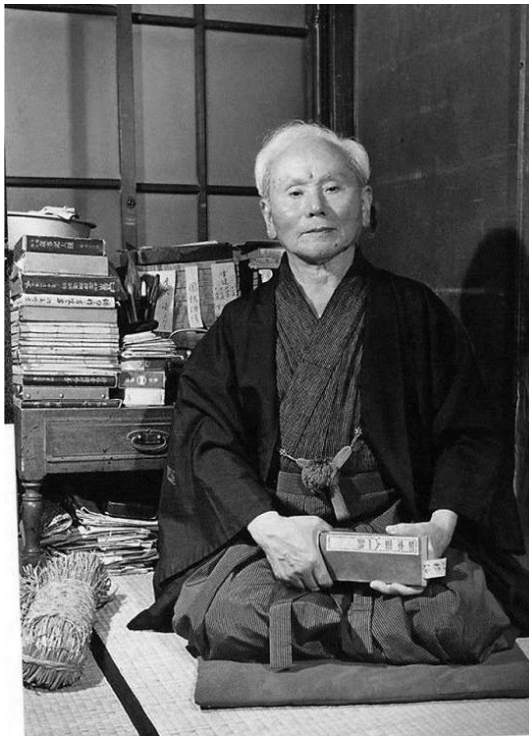


One of the many letters I received.

This hand written letter is dated

February 24, 2004

松涛館



Master Gichin Funakoshi

船越 義珍

Founder of Shotokan Karate

1868-1957



"Budo"

# CHAPTER ONE

## 第一章

### NEW TECHNIQUES BY FUNAKOSHI?

#### 船越の発明？





(船越 義珍: Gichin Funakoshi)

It is a well-documented fact that Funakoshi was an educator and also a very creative person. He brought many inventions to karate. To name a few: he is known to be the person responsible for switching Heian Shodan and Nidan; he replaced the old kata names with more Japanese sounding names; he invented the karate-gi and belt; and he introduced a dan ranking system and dojo kun. Let me further elaborate on these creations although the main subject is about the new techniques he brought in.

I had written a separate chapter on the mysteries of the Heian kata, and the particular subject of Pin-an Shodan and Nidan being switched is already in that chapter, so I will only state here that Funakoshi decided to switch the names because the original Shodan was much more difficult than Nidan. It was his judgment from an educator's point of view that it was better for the novice to learn the current Shodan first. I believe no one disputes this judgment.

He changed many of the kata names. For instance, his favorite kata Kanku Dai was called Kosokun or Kusanku or Kushanku in Okinawa. Enpi was Wansu or Wanshu, and Gankaku was Chinto. For westerners it really does not matter if a kata is called Kanku or Kosokun as both are foreign words. But for Funakoshi it was a bold but necessary move. Once again, although I have written about this in my book *Shotokan Myths*, this subject is extremely important so I want to mention it here again.

When Funakoshi brought karate to mainland Japan in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Okinawa or Ryukyu was barely recognized or known as a part of Japan. In fact, Ryukyu was an independent country until 1879 when it was formally annexed by the Satsuma clan of Japan. The Ryukyus were not considered part of Japan and the Ryukyu people were not considered Japanese. Believe it or not, this prejudice against the Okinawan people continues to the present day. Funakoshi moved to Japan in 1922, only forty some years after the annexation so you can imagine the kind of challenges he had to face. He was not considered as true Japanese, and karate was not a Japanese martial art but that of a foreign country with closer origins to Chinese martial arts. I am sure he could speak Japanese but guessed that he probably had a heavy accent. The culture of Okinawa was very different from Japan's; other than languages, even clothing and etiquette varied. Karate has become very Japanese nowadays and most westerners do not doubt it came from Japan. But that was not the case at all in the first ten or twenty years after Funakoshi introduced this art to Japan. For karate to be adopted as a Japanese martial art, Funakoshi had to come up with many creative ideas and adjustments (changes) for which we must give him a lot of credit. Without his courageous decisions karate might not have been adopted by Japanese then, and that could have meant that this art might just have remained as a secret martial art of the Okinawans. Ultimately, this would have meant that there would be no Japan Karate Association (JKA) and Shotokai, and no exporting of instructors such as Oshima, Nishiyama, Okazaki, Mori and Mikami to the US, and Harada, Enoeda, Kase, Shirai and Ochi to Europe. Without them, it would be difficult to imagine how karate could reach the level of popularity that we enjoy now, and practiced and enjoyed by millions of people around the world. In order to get rid of this "foreignness" Funakoshi changed the names to something more "Japanese." Additionally at that time, Japan was at the height of imperialism and was in conflict with China, thus anything Chinese was not a popular thing in Japan.

When we think of this now, the change seemed to be very natural but I know that some of the Okinawa masters had severely objected to it back then. Their idea was to protect and “uphold” their tradition which is also understandable. This was one of the reasons why Funakoshi decided not to return to Okinawa. Even though his wife lived in Okinawa and they had been separated for many years, he remained in Japan until he passed away in 1957.



His other inventions are the karate-gi and the dan rank system. I have mentioned earlier that Jigoro Kano, the founder of modern day Judo, was interested in Karate. Not only was Kano the owner of the biggest Judo dojo of the world at that time with literally thousands of registered students in Tokyo alone, he was also the school's principal as well as an original member of the Olympics Committee in Japan. He was the man of power in the Japanese martial arts world who could either help or destroy Funakoshi. So naturally Funakoshi adopted some of Judo's characteristics into karate. One of them was to make a karate-gi look almost exactly like a Judo-gi. He also adopted the belt system and dan ranks just like the way it was done in Judo. Funakoshi never claimed any dan rank for himself because he was very humble. The dan system is a newly developed feature in karate so by not claiming any rank he wanted to show the Okinawan masters that he himself had not changed.

I must make note of one important thing that not too many people know or consider important: the one thing that Funakoshi refused to adopt from Judo was its sports objective and its Shiai or tournament system. He proclaimed that karate is budo (a martial art) until he died and did not allow for any tournaments. Founded in 1949, Funakoshi was the first chairman of the JKA. JKA did not have its famous All Japan Championship or Zenkoku Taikai until 1957, the very year that Funakoshi passed away. Of course that was not coincidental. JKA had to wait until he passed away as they could not get Funakoshi's blessing to hold tournaments. I can sympathize with Funakoshi as I can easily guess that he was frustrated by his wishes to make karate popular, yet have to keep it as a martial art and not a sport.

Another addition to karate training was the recitation of the famous Dojo Kun. There are five of them and I will not go deep into this as most practitioners are very familiar with them since we repeat them after every training session. I will write a separate chapter on why Funakoshi had to add the Dojo Kun to the training menu. You will see that Funakoshi was a real educator and he could foresee some potential problems when karate eventually became very popular.



Dojo Kun 道場訓 written by Tetsuhiko Asai

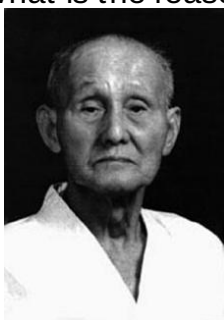
Funakoshi did not only make changes on exterior things like kata names and gi, he also ventured into the core of karate and altered Shotokan karate from its original Okinawan form of Shorin-ryu. I wish to cover three distinctive techniques: yoko ke-age, kokutsu dachi and ki-ai. Without knowing the background and how these techniques came to life, they can be the mysteries of Shotokan.

**Yoko ke-age (横蹴上げ):**



In the original Pin-an kata, the only kicking techniques found are mae geri and mikazuki geri. Although mawashi geri is a popular kick in kihon and kumite, it is curious that we do not find it in the Heian kata. However mikazuki geri, a kick similar to mawashi geri, is a mysterious kick that shows up in Godan despite its rarity in kihon and kumite. This is an interesting subject, but again, I have already written an article about this in the past so I will skip it in this article. Instead, I wish to bring your attention at this time to yoko geri ke-age in the Heian kata. Funakoshi changed mae geri in Nidan and Yondan to yoko geri ke-age. Not only Heian, but the kick techniques from almost all the original kata from Okinawan Shuri-te were limited to mae geri and mikazuki geri. (One distinctive exception is a mawashi geri and back-kick in Unsu.) Yoko geri ke-age is not found in any kata. Only one yoko kekomi technique is found in Bassai dai but it is executed to the gedan (knee) level. So why did he change the mae geri kicks to yoko ke-age?

Is yoko geri implemented in the advanced kata of Shotokan or Shorin ryu? Of course it is and we find it in Bassai Dai and Sho. However, that kick is a gedan kekomi and we notice that it is not a high kick of ke-age. But you may say, "We do ke-age in Gankaku and Kanku Dai." Gankaku's original name is Chinto and Kanku is Kosoukun. Those kata are practiced by both the Shorin-ryu and Shito-ryu. The techniques in those kata are similar but one big difference is the kicks. Shorin-ryu and Shito-ryu both have mae geri instead of yoko ke-age; all the kicks in those kata are mae geri and not a single one is yoko geri. Shotokan is the only ryuha (style) that uses yoko ke-age in those kata. Even Wado-ryu that branched off from early Funakoshi karate uses mae geri and not ke-age. What is the reason for this mystery?



Hiro nori Otsuka, Founder Wado-ryu

Obviously, Funakoshi changed the kicks of these kata from mae geri to yoko ke-age sometime after Otsuka, the founder of Wado-ryu, had split from him around 1929. Otsuka started karate training under Funakoshi in 1922 and stayed with him for several years. It is difficult to determine exactly when he split from Funakoshi but it is well-known that Funakoshi and Otsuka did not go their separate ways amicably. (Wado-ryu itself is an interesting ryuha but we will not go into this subject here.) So when did Otsuka leave or depart from Funakoshi? Otsuka opened his own dojo in 1931, so we can say that by that time he must be totally independent and outside of Funakoshi's influence. Therefore, we can assume Funakoshi changed the kicks from mae geri to yoko ke-age in all kata including the Heian kata sometime after 1930.

Okinawan masters had kept the kata with mae geri for centuries. It is a big mystery why Funakoshi changed those kicks after he arrived in Japan. I can think of at least two reasons why. You must remember that Funakoshi was a dedicated educator and he was teaching energetic university students. I suspect those young and flexible students asked to learn different kicks. I am sure Funakoshi taught them kicks that are not found in kata such as mawashi geri and yoko ke-age. He could explain that mawashi geri was a version of mikazuki

geri. (I had already explained in another chapter about the relationship between mikazuki geri and mawashi geri.) But he had to do something with yoko ke-age so he probably changed some mae geri to ke-age to make more kicking varieties in kata. In addition, he realized that body shifting is easier when ke-age is used. Take Heian Nidan (the same move is found in Kanku Dai). The 7th move is right side yoko ke-age to the 6 o'clock direction. The 6th move is right chudan nobashi zuki with right kokutsu dachi to the 3 o'clock direction. If you want to do mae geri to the 6 o'clock direction as seen in the original kata, you must rotate your body 90 degrees while you are standing on your left leg. This move is not too difficult for Shorin-ryu and Shito-ryu practitioners. Why? Because in their kata the stance of the 6th move is neko ashi dachi, a much shorter stance, thus it is easier to lift the front foot and turn the body 90 degrees. (I will mention this in another chapter but Funakoshi also changed neko ashi dachi to kokutsu dachi in most of the kata.) It made sense to Funakoshi to kick with yoko ke-age from kokutsu dachi without having to change the body's direction. It is true that Shotokan kata became very dynamic and impressive with yoko ke-age which is not found in Shorin and Shito-ryu. Although Funakoshi's son, Gigo, is credited for adopting high kicks like yoko ke-age, (which is not a surprise since Gigo was probably more flexible than his father and could execute these techniques better,) I believe that Funakoshi Sr. was the one who made the final decisions to change.

Nevertheless, unfortunately, this change did result in a couple of negative things: it created a bunkai problem, and it caused a loss of an important body rotation movement. In Okinawa there was and still exists, a strict rule to keep all kata as they are; no modification or changes are allowed. Because Funakoshi boldly broke this strict rule to make Shotokan kata more dynamic and attractive, he was criticized by many Okinawan masters of that time for making too many fundamental changes to Okinawan karate. This was obviously another reason why he never went back to Okinawa. He remained in Japan and lived without his wife until his death at the age of 87.

### **Kokutsu dachi (後屈立ち):**

You are probably surprised that I call Kokutsu dachi a mysterious stance. Did you know that Shorin-ryu, forefather of Shotokan does not have kokutsu dachi (back stance)? Funakoshi learned the Pinan kata (the original name for Heian) in Okinawa with neko ashi dachi. Only after migrating to Japan in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century did he change the stance to kokutsu dachi. Why did he change it? This is one of the biggest mysteries of Shotokan karate, but not too many people notice or talk about it. I am amazed that all Shotokan practitioners practice this stance diligently without reservation.



The picture on the left shows the 4th move of Heian Nidan (Pinan Shodan) by a Shorin-ryu practitioner. Shorin ryu comes from Itosu, the same teacher of Funakoshi. So, we can safely say that the very similar moves including stance were taught to Funakoshi by Itosu when he was in Okinawa.

Before I go into how kokutsu came about, let us look further into the stances of other styles since we can learn some important things from them. Shorin-ryu does not have a stance called kokutsu dachi.



Shito-ryu kokutsu dachi Gojuryu kokutsu dachi

They have neko ashi dachi instead. However, Shito-ryu and Gojuryu have kokutsu dachi. What do you think of the stances in the two pictures shown above? Do they look like our kokutsu dachi? No? It looks like our zenkutsu dachi except that the face is turned to the back

like we do in Enpi.

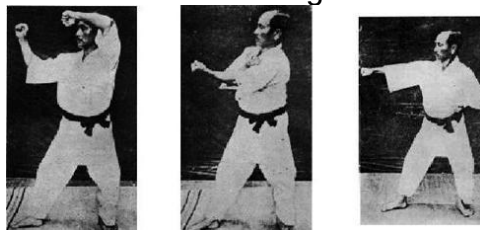
Whether you agree or not, it is a fact that Funakoshi had to invent this stance after he moved to Tokyo. Neither he nor any of his students documented this invention. I am aware that my research finding can be very shocking to most Shotokan practitioners. I expect I will hear many objections and refusals to accept this information, but I dare reveal this fact for the benefit of keeping Shotokan's history as accurate as possible, and we must know the truth.



昭和十三年の東京大学で  
「平安二段」の図解

Let's take a look at some photos to review this particular stance. The picture here is a historic photo that shows Funakoshi leading the university students with Heian Nidan (Keio University dojo, 1930).

Here is another interesting photo: Funakoshi doing the moves #4-#6 of Heian Nidan.



You will notice that the length of this stance is somewhat shorter than what you are taught now. It is almost between the modern day kokutsu and neko ashi stances. Is this because Funakoshi was old and his legs were weak so his stance was short and high? No, I definitely do not think so. He was in his fifties and he looks he was in good shape. There must have been another reason. My research shows that Funakoshi had to invent this stance called kokutsu dachi.

To answer the question of why he had to create this stance, we must go back to the challenges Funakoshi faced in Japan where he had to get support from Kano. Kano had asked Funakoshi to teach some of his top students some karate techniques. This was a great opportunity for Funakoshi because he could gain supporters from the Judo practitioners. But at the same time it was a risky venture because he could not show that karate was much more lethal than Judo, and that Judo was no match for karate. If the truth were shown that Judo would be badly beaten by karate; Kano would never support him and his activities, and that would have meant the end of teaching karate in Japan.

In order to get inside of an opponent to throw, the first thing a Judo-ka does is to grab his lapels and pull him in. How would a karate-ka respond? You know that we would immediately kick him in the groin before you are grabbed. This is the very purpose of using neko ashi dachi when you face an opponent. Funakoshi could not kick the Judo-ka before his hands reached Funakoshi's gi since that would prove that karate technique was too lethal and would make Judo's first move worthless. Instead Funakoshi had to pull himself back after he was grabbed. But since the Judo-ka was bigger and stronger, it was not possible for Funakoshi to hold his position in neko-ashi dachi. Thus he invented a longer stance to withhold a strong pull which you can see in the techniques in Heian Yondan. In this scenario, after a struggle Funakoshi followed up with a chudan kick. It may be difficult to believe but this process was needed to justify a kicking attack. In other words the Judo-ka was given a chance to grab and pull at his opponent first before he got kicked in the groin from the very beginning. So Funakoshi decided to change all neko ashi dachi in most of the basic kata into kokutsu dachi, and turned neko-ashi dachi followed by a groin kick into a forbidden technique.

Without knowing the tremendous struggle Funakoshi had to go through, the following story may be difficult for the readers to believe but it is a sad truth. Kano was in fact so good at marketing Judo that a movie company made a movie based on a famous Judo novel Sanshiro. A Judo expert, Sanshiro was the main character and the hero. He had an arch rival who was vicious, rude, and a thug. Of course, this guy was a karate practitioner. Funakoshi supposedly

was asked to help with the action in the movie that involved karate techniques. Obviously there was a final showdown at the end of this movie and you can guess who won. Thus, the images of viciousness and rudeness portrayed in this movie became a stereotype for karate-ka and Funakoshi had to accept this prejudice. But on the other hand he gained much acceptance from Kano and his group, which led to his great success in introducing karate to Japan. So, not only did Funakoshi acquire the karate-gi and belt grading concept from judo to karate, he also created a mysterious stance called kokutsu dachi.

### **Ki-ai (気合):**



I have already written a chapter on this subject in my book *Shotokan Myths*, so I will only give a brief summary here. If you are interested in this subject, I recommend that you read my book. In short, there was no ki-ai in Okinawa karate, especially for the Shuri-te styles such as Shorin-ryu. Why? Unlike the Naha-te styles such as Goju ryu and Uechi ryu, Shuri-te believed in the natural breathing method or quiet breathing.

If a Shuri-te practitioner did a kata with heavy or audible breathing, his performance would be considered poor. The masters in the pre-19<sup>th</sup> century had to practice in secret. Besides being secretive among them, there were also rivalries among the practitioners. In addition, the Okinawan people were told by the Satsuma clan not to practice any martial arts which included karate. Therefore, they could only practice in the middle of the night without making any noise. They even had to make a dance with karate techniques in it so that they could lie and say that they were dancing if they were caught in action. So can you imagine having a loud ki-ai in your kata back in those days in Okinawa? Why did Funakoshi add ki-ai in karate then? Ki-ai is considered a necessary and important element in Japanese martial arts. It is significant not only in Judo, but also in Kyudo, Jujitsu, and especially Kendo. I remember when I was practicing Judo my teacher told us that we had to give a ki-ai every time we threw an opponent. In a tournament, a full point—*Ippon* would not be awarded unless a throw was accompanied by a loud ki-ai. So, when Kano sent his students to learn karate from Funakoshi, these Judo practitioners must have felt strange training in a very quiet dojo. They felt that the fighting spirit was lacking, and suggested to Funakoshi to encourage his students to do ki-ai. After consideration, Funakoshi decided to adopt it as the young university students must have liked the environment filled with loud yells more interesting. I am sure Funakoshi himself held a different belief in ki-ai but he must have felt he had to make this change. I mentioned earlier that originally kata did not have ki-ai. You can see that some of the Okinawan styles still keep this tradition of no ki-ai in kata. Funakoshi decided to add two ki-ai in each kata, but this was not a strict rule until kata was adopted in shiai in the late 1950's. Now it is a requirement that a competitor has to give at least two loud ki-ai and they must be delivered at the “correct” parts of a kata, otherwise points would be deducted which you know if you are familiar with the current tournament rules.



This is off the subject but there is another person who made ki-ai into a “fashion”. If you are a Bruce Lee fan then you know his unique ki-ai in his movies. Actually, it became sort of his trade mark. He turned the standard (boring) ki-ai into something cool. The Hong Kong kung fu movies they used to have were boring and often times gory with a lot of blood. This was before Jackie Chan and Jet Li. Bruce Lee definitely created a totally new kind of kung fu movie that is very fun and entertaining to watch. His facial expressions and ki-ai were a big part of his success.

Because of the incorporation of a long kokutsu dachi stance, a dynamic yoko ke-age, and loud ki-ai, Shotokan karate, in fact, became quite different from the original Te that Funakoshi brought to Japan in 1922. Whether you consider those changes Funakoshi made good or bad for karate, no one can deny that without Funakoshi’s life-long endeavor with much patience and diplomacy this Okinawan art of Te could not have seen the huge success and become one of the major martial arts in Japan.

押忍

## CHAPTER TWO

### 第二章

## THE MYSTERIES OF THE HEIAN KATA

### 平安形の謎



The Heian kata are the fundamental kata and the backbone of Shotokan karate. These are the first kata a white belt learns unless his dojo practices the Taikyoku as the first kata. How many times have you practiced the Heian kata? Maybe you have practiced them several hundreds of times or even more. For some senior practitioners, it might be thousands of times. So, you may feel you know these kata like the back of your hand. In this chapter I will bring up many points that are taken for granted, yet under close scrutiny appear to be very mysterious. You will be surprised to find the truth and facts that underlie the history of Shotokan. Many Shotokan kata are believed to be quite old. Some are said to be as old as the history of Shuri-te, which has a several hundred year old history of which Shotokan is a branch.



On the other hand, the fundamental kata, Heian (Shodan through Godan), were created by one modern day master of Shuri-te, Anko Itosu (photo left), in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some claim the creation date of these kata to be early 20<sup>th</sup> century because karate was inducted into the public school system in 1901. But for the same reason, I believe it to be the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, since Itosu must have had to use this kata to convince the school management that karate training was not only beneficial but also safe for school children.

Before the creation of the Heian, Tekki, (originally called Naifanchi), were the first kata the Shuri-te students learned. Until the Meiji Restoration or the end of feudalism, in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, training in Okinawa was conducted secretly inside the master's house or in a graveyard at night.

In addition to this, an Okinawan sensei typically took only one or two students at any one time and a group lesson was unheard of. As Japan opened its ports to foreign countries, ending samurai or feudal culture in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the royalty system in Okinawa was abandoned. With this big change, karate was no longer needed by the palace guards,



as there was no longer a king to protect. Naturally, few knocked on the karate masters' doors asking for their teaching. The karate masters feared that karate would soon be forgotten. In order to save karate, Itosu convinced the government of Okinawa to include it as part of public school PE activities. It was formally incorporated into the curriculum of elementary schools in 1901, then into high schools in 1905. Accordingly, Itosu formulated a teaching syllabus for group lessons with students.

One of the challenging things he had to do was to create a new set of kata that was appropriate for the complete novice. When karate was taught one-to-one, in former times, a student was required to do a lot of household chores such as carrying water and firewood, helping with fieldwork, cleaning the house, etc. During this process, which could last one to several years, the student did not receive any formal training or teaching. The student's body was exercised to develop its natural strength.



If the teacher thought the student needed more leg strength he might make him to stand in a *kiba dachi* for hours. So, by the time he completed this “pre-training” period his legs were in very good shape. He could possibly see his teacher practicing kata and thus he might be prepared to take on the first kata, Tekki. We all know that Tekki is a very unique kata. The steps are only to the sides and there is a specific purpose and objective to this kata. I have written about this subject in depth in my first book, *Shotokan Myths*, so please refer to that chapter. The essence of Tekki is not appropriate for totally novice students as the specific learning points are quite advanced.

Other advanced kata such as Bassai and Kanku are of course too difficult and not appropriate for the school children. Thus, Itosu created a set of kihon (basic) kata called Pinan (now Heian) that are much easier for students to learn as well as for instructors to teach. Heian or Pin-an was adopted soon after by all Shuri-te organizations such as Shorin ryu, Shotokan, Wado-ryu and even Shito-ryu (a style of hybrid lineage of Shuri-te and Naha-te). This is a brief history and its background, which many of you already know. The history of the Heian kata is a little over 100 years old, yet surprisingly, there are many unchecked and strange “facts” found within these kata. Some of these are indeed mysteries, but it is stranger still that few have ever questioned or challenged them. I was too curious to be quiet so I researched the real facts. There are many unanswered questions in Shotokan karate. I call those subjects mysteries. I am happy to present the mysteries and to share my understanding and hypotheses. I hope this will become a bridge to the answers to these questions and to a better understanding of the Heian kata.

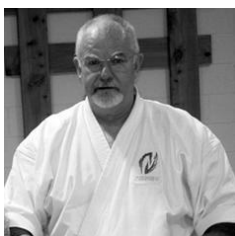
### **Mystery 1: Origin and Channan (チャンナン)**

It is well documented that the creator of the Heian kata is Anko Itosu. He wanted to popularize karate by having it adopted by the public school system. He was the organizer of this movement and with his great work karate became a part of physical education at an elementary school in 1901 then in a high school in 1905. It is also documented that Itosu created Pin-an for the school system. He created this kata in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in order to show this simple kata to the school officials and to convince them that it could be learned by students who were totally new to karate. Heian was then called Pin-an with the same Chinese characters. Even though the versions of the Pin-an kata handed down by Shorin-ryu and Shito-ryu are slightly different from the Heian, I am sure my readers agree that Heian came from Pin-an. Up to this point the history of Pin-an/Heian is well documented. We now look further back to try to understand how Itosu created Pin-an. The mystery is “where did this kata come from?” Itosu did not leave any written record of this but his students, like Mabuni, Funakoshi and Motobu, mentioned an original kata called Channan. So the mystery is this kata, Channan. Regarding this unknown kata, there are two theories of its origin. Let us look into each theory.

#### **A. Channan, an old name of Pin-an**

One theory is the name of Channan was the original name of the kata Itosu created in honor of a Chinese martial artist who was shipwrecked on Okinawa and taught Itosu some Chinese fighting arts. When he introduced this kata to the public school in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century he changed the name to Pin-an. It is said that he asked the school students to come up with a new name and one student came up with the name, Pin-an meaning “Peaceful”.

There is an excellent article on Channan by a well-known Okinawa karate historian, Patrick McCarthy (photo right). With his permission I will post the entire article on the subject below.



### **CHANNAN: The “Lost” Kata of Itosu?**

#### **Introduction**

It is commonly held that the series of five basic kata called *Pinan* were developed by Itosu Anko (1832-1915) in around 1907 for inclusion in the karate curriculum of the Okinawan school system. However, the actual history of the *Pinan* series has been the subject of intense curiosity as of late. There are basically two schools of thought, one that Itosu Anko developed them from the older classical forms that were cultivated in and around the *Shuri* area, and the other that Itosu was reworking a longer Chinese form called *Channan*.

Unfortunately, most of the written references to the *Channan*/*Pinan* phenomenon in the English language are basically re-hashes of the same uncorroborated oral testimony. This article will examine the primary literature written by direct students of Itosu, as well as more recent research in the Japanese language, in an effort to solve the “mystery” of *Channan*.

#### **Itosu Anko**

In order to understand the *Pinan* phenomenon, perhaps it is best to start off with a capsule biography of their architect, Itosu Anko (1832-1915). Many sources state that Itosu was born in the Yamakawa section of *Shuri* (Bishop, 1999; Okinawa Prefecture, 1994; Okinawa Prefecture, 1995), however, noted Japanese martial arts historian Iwai Tsukuo states that he was actually born in *Gibo*, *Shuri*, and later relocated to Yamakawa (Iwai, 1992). He is commonly believed to have studied under Matsumura Sokon (1809-1901), but also appears to have had other influences, such as Nagahama of Naha (Iwai, 1992; Motobu, 1932), Matsumora Kosaku of Tomari and a master named Gusukuma (Nihon Karate Kenkyukai, 1956).

There does not seem to be much detail about Itosu's early life, except for the fact that he was a student of the Ryukyuan civil fighting traditions. At around age 23, he passed the civil service examinations and was employed by the Royal government (Iwai, 1992). It seems as if Itosu gained his position as a clerical scribe for the King through an introduction by his friend and fellow karate master Asato Anko (Funakoshi, 1988). Itosu stayed with the Royal government until the Meiji Restoration, when the Ryukyu Kingdom became Okinawa Prefecture. Itosu stayed on and worked for the Okinawan Prefectural government until 1885 (Iwai, 1992).

There is some controversy as to when Itosu became a student of Matsumura. Some say that he first met Matsumura when Itosu was in his late 20s (Iwai, 1992), whereas others maintain that Itosu was older than 35 when he began studying from Matsumura (Fujiwara, 1990). Matsumura appears to have been friendly with Itosu's father (Iwai, 1992).

Be that as it may, Itosu is said to have mastered the *Naifuanchi* kata (Nihon Karate Kenkyukai, 1950; Okinawa Pref., 1995). In fact, one direct student of Itosu, namely Funakoshi Gichin, recalled 10 years of studying nothing but the three *Naifuanchi* kata under the eminent master (Funakoshi, 1976).

Again, there is some controversy as to where Itosu had learned the *Naifuanchi* kata from. Some give credit to Matsumura for teaching this kata to Itosu (Murakami, 1991). However, others say differently, and here is where we first start to see reference to *Channan*, as the name of a person. It is said that a Chinese sailor who was shipwrecked on Okinawa hid in a cave at Tomari. It was from this man that Itosu supposedly learned the *Naifuanchi* kata, among other things (Gima, et al, 1986).

In either case, it is known that Itosu was among the first to teach karate (*toudi*) publicly, and began teaching karate as physical education in the school system as early as 1901, where he taught at the *Shuri Jinjo Primary School* (Iwai, 1992; Okinawa Pref., 1994). He also went on to teach at *Shuri Dai-ichi Middle School* and the Okinawa Prefectural Men's Normal School in 1905 (Bishop, 1999; Okinawa Pref., 1994, 1995).

In addition to his “spearheading a crusade” (McCarthy, 1996) to modernize *toudi* practices and get it taught in the school system, Itosu was also known for his physical strength. It is said that he was able to crush a bamboo stalk in his hands (Funakoshi, 1976, 1988), once wrestled a raging bull to the ground and calmed it (Nagamine, 1986) and one could strike his arms with 2-inch thick poles and he would not budge (Iwai, 1992).

Itosu's unique contributions to the art of Karatedo include not only his 1908 letter to the Japanese Ministry of Education and Ministry of War, expounding on the 10 precepts of *Toudi* training, but also the creation of several kata. These include not only the *Pinan* series, but also *Naifuanchi Nidan* and *Sandan* (Kinjo, 1991; Murakami, 1991), and possibly *Kusanku Sho* and *Passai Sho* (Iwai, 1992). Another kata that has often been attributed to Itosu is the *Shiho Kusanku Kata* (Kinjo, 1956a; Mabuni et al, 1938), but more recent evidence points to the actual originator of this paradigm to have been Mabuni Kenwa himself (Sells, 1995). In addition to creating several kata, the other kata that Itosu taught, such as *Chinto*, *Useishi* (*Gojushiho*), *Passai Dai*, and *Kusanku Dai*, etc., had been changed from their original guises, in order to make them more palatable to his physical education classes (Kinjo, 1991).

Itosu Anko passed away in March 1915, leaving behind a legacy that very few today even recognize or comprehend.

#### **Early Written References to Channan and Pinan**

References to *Channan* can be found as far back as 1934. In the karate research journal entitled *Karate no Kenkyu*, published by Nakasone Genwa, Motobu Choki is quoted referring to the *Channan* and the *Pinan* kata:

“(Sic.) I was interested in the martial arts since I was a child, and studied under many teachers. I studied with Itosu Sensei for 7-8 years. At first, he lived in Urasoe, then moved to Nakashima Oshima in Naha, then on to Shikina, and finally to the villa of Baron Ie. He spent his final years living near the middle school.

I visited him one day at his home near the school, where we sat talking about the martial arts and current affairs. While I was there, 2-3 students also dropped by and sat talking with us. Itosu Sensei turned to the students and said ‘show us a kata.’ The kata that they performed was very similar to the *Channan* kata that I knew, but there were some differences also. Upon asking the student what the kata was, he replied ‘It is *Pinan no Kata*.’ The students left shortly after that, upon which I turned to Itosu Sensei and said ‘I learned a kata called *Channan*, but the kata that those students just performed now was different. What is going on?’ Itosu Sensei replied ‘Yes, the kata is slightly different, but the kata that you just saw is the kata that I have decided upon. The students all told me that the name *Pinan* is better, so I went along with the opinions of the young people.’ These

kata, which were developed by Itosu Sensei, underwent change even during his own lifetime." (Murakami, 1991; 120)

There is also reference to Pinan being called Channan in its early years in the 1938 publication *Kobo Kenpo Karatedo Nyumon* by Mabuni Kenwa and Nakasone Genwa. Mabuni and Nakasone write that those people who learned this kata as Channan still taught it under that name (Mabuni, et al, 1938).

Kinjo Hiroshi, one of Japan's most senior teachers and historians of the Okinawan fighting traditions, and a direct student of three of Itosu's students, namely Hanashiro Chomo, Oshiro Choji, and Tokuda Anbun, wrote a series of articles on the Pinan kata in *Gekkan Karatedo* magazine in the mid 1950s. In the first installment he maintains that the Pinan kata were originally called Channan, and there were some technical differences between Channan and the updated versions known as Pinan (Kinjo, 1956a).

Again according to Kinjo Hiroshi, Miyagi Hisateru, a former student of Itosu who graduated from the Okinawa Prefectural Normal School in 1916, stated that when he was studying under the old master, Itosu only really taught the first three Pinan with any real enthusiasm, and that the last two seem to have been rather neglected at that time (Kinjo, 1956b). Although one can speculate about what this means, it is nevertheless a very interesting piece of testimony by someone who was "there."

Sakagami Ryusho, in his 1978 *Karatedo Kata Taikan* as well as Miyagi Tokumasa in his 1987 *Karate no Rekishi* both give extensive kata lists, and both list a kata known as Yoshimura no Channan (Miyagi, 1987; Sakagami, 1978). It is unknown who Yoshimura was, but he may have been a student of Itosu.

American karate historian Ernest Estrada has also stated that Kyoda Juhatsu (1887-1968), a direct student of Higashionna Kanryo, Wu Xianhui (Jpn. Go Kenki), Yabu Kentsu, etc. and the founder of the To'onryu karatedo system, also knew and taught a series of two basic blocking, punching and kicking exercises known as Channan (Estrada, 1998).

#### **Shiraguma no Kata**

According to Iwai Tsukuo, one of Japan's most noted Budo researchers and teacher of Motobu Choki's karate in Gunma Prefecture, *Motoburyu Karatejutsu*, which is being preserved by Choki's son Motobu Chosei in Osaka, contains what is known as Shiraguma no Kata, which he maintains used to be called Channan. He also states that this kata is "somewhat similar to the Pinan, yet different." (Iwai, 1997).

#### **The Other Side of the Coin**

The flip side to this theory states that Itosu did not create the Pinan kata, but actually remodeled older Chinese-based hsing/kata called Channan. This theory states that Itosu learned a series of Chinese Quan-fa hsing from a shipwrecked Chinese at Tomari, and reworked them into five smaller components, re-naming them Pinan because the Chinese pronunciation "Chiang-Nan" was too difficult (Bishop, 1999).

It has been argued that the source for these Channan kata was a Chinese from an area called Annan, or a man named Annan (Bishop, 1999). On the other hand, others say that the man's name was Channan (Iwai, 1992). Still others go into even more detail, stating that Itosu learned these hsing/kata from a man named Channan, and named them after their source, later adding elements of the Kusanku Dai kata to create the Pinan (Gima, et al, 1986; Kinjo. 1999).

There is also interesting oral testimony passed down in the Tomaridi tradition that is propagated in the Okinawa Gojuryu Tomaridi Karatedo Association of Tokashiki Iken that states that Itosu learned the Channan/Pinan kata from a Chinese at Tomari in one day. The proponents of Tomaridi said that there was no need to learn "over-night kata" and that this is the reason that the Tomari traditions did not include instruction in the Pinan kata (Okinawa Pref., 1995).

This sentiment also echoes the statement by one of Itosu's top students, Yabu Kentsu, made to his students:

"(sic) If you have time to practice the Pinan, practice Kushanku instead (Gima, et al, 1986, p. 86)."

#### **Conclusion**

While more research, such as in-depth technical analysis of Motobu's Shiraguma no Kata, needs to be done, the evidence at hand seems to point not to a "long lost kata" but rather to the constant and inevitable evolution of a martial art.

Although there is opposition, most of the primary written materials point to the fact that Itosu was indeed the originator of the Channan/Pinan tradition, based upon his own research, experience, and analyses.

However, in either case, Itosu Anko and his efforts left a lasting mark on the fighting traditions of old Okinawa, and will probably always be remembered as one of the visionaries who were able to lift the veil of secrecy that once enshrouded karatedo.

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If we believe Itosu was the one who created Channan, then how did he do that? The first theory says Itosu selected some techniques that are not dangerous but excellent for physical exercise. It is true that Heian Shodan has a four *shuto uke* sequence that is found in Kanku Dai. Heian Nidan has many moves that are identical to those in Kanku Dai including the four *shuto uke* sequence. In fact, the moves, starting from the right *yoko ke-age* all the way up to the left *osae uke* and the right *chudan nukite* are identical. Heian Sandan has some similar techniques to Jion and Gankaku namely *enpi uke*. Heian Godan has many moves that are found in Bassai Dai, Kanku Dai and Gankaku. To make learning and teaching in middle school easier he created five short kata rather than one long kata.

## B. Channan, a model kata

The second theory is that Channan was a much longer kata that consisted of two parts (Dai and Sho). In this theory Itosu supposedly made five kata by taking parts from Channan. The advocate of this theory is Dr. Elmar Schmeisser.

The advertisement for his book, *Channan: Heart of the Heians*, reads; "Dr. Elmar Schmeisser, explores the possibility of the modern day Heians as derived from the Chinese kata Channan-Dai and Channan-Sho. The author makes no definitive claim that his studies are absolute, but presents his research in a sound historical manner leaving the reader to make his or her own decision regarding the origins of the Heian kata based on the research presented. Channan: Heart of the Heians is loaded with simple-to-follow, step-by-step photos of Channan-Dai and Channan-Sho, and accompanying text for each step. In a simple straightforward way, the author clearly illustrates apparent or perceived correlations between the Channan kata and the modern day Heians.

An added plus in this book is the way it is laid out; the book is designed in such a way that keeps the reader flowing seamlessly from one photographic illustration to another. This book is a fantastic work and will be greatly appreciated by anyone who enjoys the study of traditional Japanese kata, bunkai, and kata origins."

This book is available through Amazon so you may purchase a copy if you are interested in this theory. One thing I need to mention about his research is that he learned this kata from an instructor in the Philippines and not from an Okinawan. This kata is said to have been handed down from China to Southeast Asia (not Okinawa) and then to the Philippines where he learned it. Because of this lineage I tend to believe the first theory is more believable than the second one.

Aside from the historical point of view, the author put a lot of effort into the bunkai of the kata and I found some to be excellent and useful. So even if you do not agree with the historical perspective, this book can be a good read for those Shotokan practitioners who like to study the bunkai of the Heian kata.

It is totally up to the readers to decide which of these two theories is closer to the truth. Much research has been done and a lot of questions have been answered but there are many more questions that are still unanswered. Due to the lack of written documents and records in Okinawa, I suspect these questions will never be answered and I fear that the real stories will disappear into folds of the history.

## Mystery 2: Shodan (初段) and Nidan (二段)

Many readers may already know that Itosu, the Heian's creator, put Heian Nidan (Originally Pinan Shodan) as the first kata, followed by Heian Shodan (Pinan Nidan). When Funakoshi introduced the Heian kata to Japan he switched Heian Shodan and Heian Nidan to where we see them now. On the other hand, Shorin-ryu and Shito-ryu, kept the original order. However, it makes sense to practice Heian Shodan first as it is the simplest kata and much easier than Nidan. The puzzling question is why did Itosu put a more challenging kata before a much simpler and easier kata? I am sure it was intentional. Then what were the reason and his intention?

Funakoshi switched Heian Shodan and Heian Nidan, thus confusing the explanation of the history of Pin-an Shodan/Nidan in regard to Heian Shodan/Nidan. So, I will use the abbreviations O Shodan, to refer to the Original Shodan or Pin-an Shodan, and C Shodan, to mean the Current (Shotokan) Shodan which was Pin-an Nidan. Similarly, Heian Nidan will be referred to as O Nidan and C Nidan. I hope this method will minimize the possibility of confusion.



Kenwa Mabuni: 1889-1952

It is well known that Shorin-ryu and Shito-ryu kept the original order. By the way, examining Shorin-ryu (小林流) and Shito-ryu (糸東流) is very useful when you study the origin of Shotokan. Shorin-ryu is Shuri-te and it is directly descended from Itosu. Shito-ryu is an interesting style as it is supposed to have elements of both Shuri-te and Naha-te. Kenwa Mabuni, the founder of this style, learned Shuri-te from Itosu (糸洲) and Naha-te from Higaonna (東恩納). By taking one Chinese character from each sensei's name; 糸 and 東, Mabuni named his style, Shito (糸東) ryu.

As I mentioned earlier, Funakoshi was the one who switched the order of those two kata after introducing the Heian to Japan, and it is easy to figure out why he switched them. O Shodan clearly has more challenging techniques such as kicks, *gyaku* (reverse) *hanmi* and *gyaku zuki*. Funakoshi was an educator and it certainly made sense for him to put the easiest kata first then move to more challenging kata. Now, the real question is this; why did Itosu place a more complex kata, O Shodan before a simpler kata, O Nidan? This was a mystery to me. I heard a speculation that "After Itosu created O Shodan, he found that the novice students had so many problems that he created a simpler kata, O Nidan." I do not agree with this idea. If Itosu had thought O Nidan was a better kata for beginning students, he would have switched the order as Funakoshi did. But he kept the original order and the fact that he wanted to start with O Shodan was very intentional. Interestingly, Shito-ryu and other Shuri-te styles in Okinawa did not adopt the original order exactly. According to the book written by Mabuni of Shito-ryu, the order of teaching is as follow: teach O Nidan first then on to Sandan before the students are exposed to O Shodan. The reason for this order can be explained simply by the fact that those two kata are easier to teach to beginners than O Shodan. So the question still remains. What was Itosu's intention in putting O Shodan as the first kata of Heian?

Here is my hypothesis for his intention and the reason for the kata order. It is clearly documented that Itosu was an excellent karate-ka and sensei and that he was the key person to introduce karate into the public education system. However, what is not written is that I assume he was an old-school martial artist before an educator. As a traditional Shuri-te sensei with the former one-to-one method of teaching, he wanted to begin with a "real" kata or something that is similar to a kata like Kanku, with high level techniques. It sounds almost contradictory to teach a novice student a difficult kata, but I understand how he felt. For him O Nidan was too simple and was not good enough to be called a first kata. Kanku Dai is the backbone of Shuri-te as in Shotokan. As you can see, the sequence from the first kick to nukite in O Shodan is found in Kanku Dai. From that sequence it goes on to four shuto uke techniques that are also found in Kanku Dai. On the other hand, O Nidan has no identical techniques and few similar techniques to the original Shuri-te kata such as Kanku, Bassai and Jion except for the last 4 movements of shuto uke. I suspect he believed the first Pin-an kata must be similar to the kata, Kanku Dai. Thus I conclude that Itosu, the martial artist, sincerely believed that the novice students would be furthered more by learning a "real" kata first before moving on to a kata that is very basic in its techniques. So I believe that Itosu was a martial artist first and then an educator.

Funakoshi was with Itosu for many years so he must have known his sensei's intention and

concept. Then why did he make a switch that contradicts his sensei's belief? This is also a mystery. I believe there were at least three reasons. One is that Funakoshi was an educator in a broader sense before being a karate instructor of the old Okinawan school. He saw more value in being able to teach more easily than in the martial arts challenge. The second and more pressing reason was that he had to teach this kata to Japanese university students who were vastly different from the more mentally prepared Okinawan youth. Funakoshi faced Japanese students who had no concept of karate and its training and they would practice only four years until graduation. It was impossible to continue karate training in Tokyo at that time as there was no karate dojo there. So, he had only four years to teach all those kata starting from Heian. In Okinawa, a teacher used to expect the students to focus on one kata for 3 to 5 years. If Funakoshi had kept that mentality it would have taken him 15 to 25 years to teach all the Heian kata. He had to teach not only Heian but at least 5 or more kata if he wanted to produce any yudansha (black belts) and he had only 4 years to do this. You can easily imagine that for the university students the process had to be faster, so the ease with which it could be taught had to take priority. The third reason is less obvious. Not too many readers are probably aware that Funakoshi had the support of Kano, the founder of Judo, when he started to teach karate in Tokyo. Kano requested that he teach kata to some of his senior students, a request which he could not refuse. For Judo practitioners, kicks are the most difficult techniques, thus introducing the C (current) Shodan to Judo practitioners made sense.

In addition, you must know that Funakoshi's Japanese was a heavily accented Okinawan dialect and those university students and Judo practitioners were speaking Tokyo (or Kanto) dialect. Without any exaggeration, these two dialects were close to two totally different languages. A good comparison would be more like the difference between Spanish and Portuguese than between British English and American English. Japanese students typically do not ask questions of their teachers but the students he had were different. They were either students at elite universities such as Tokyo University, Keio University and Hosei University or the senior practitioners of Kodokan Judo. Those elite students must have asked many questions, as did the Judo practitioners, with Kano's encouragement. The intention of those Judoka was not to become karate experts but to introduce some of the karate techniques to Judo, if possible, or to find a way to fight against the karate-ka. It can easily be assumed that those university students asked him why the original Shodan was so much more difficult and why they had to start with this kata. Along with the big language difficulty I could imagine the insurmountable task of explaining the deep meaning of the true intention of his sensei, Itosu. Therefore, I suspect that Funakoshi decided to switch these two kata just as he changed the pronunciation of this kata from Pin-an to Heian.

### **Mystery 3: The First Step (運足第一步)**

Why is the first step of Heian kata always to the left side? When you are in a fight, isn't it more natural and advantageous if you position your opponent in front of you? So, why do we not teach the beginners to move forward or backward with techniques pointing to the front? Are we learning to fight with an opponent who stands on left side of us? Do you not wonder why? Or is there a specific meaning to this? Maybe it was a fluke or unintentional?

It is interesting to realize that the first kata for Shuri-te (Shorin-ryu, which is the forefather of Shotokan) was Tekki before Heian was created, towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The uniqueness of Tekki is this kata uses only *kiba dachi*. It is also interesting that all three Tekki kata start to the right side and that the initial techniques are executed to the right.

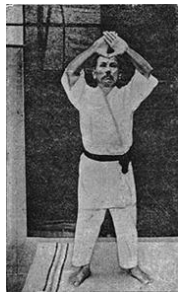
Let's look at the other 8 major JKA kata and check the direction of the beginning and of the initial techniques:

**Bassai Dai:** step forward and execute the first technique forward

**Kanku Dai:** shift left foot to make left kokutsu dachi to left side and the first technique is also executed to the left side

**Jion:** step back and the first technique is executed forward

**Jutte (Jitte):** step back and the technique is forward



**Enpi:** left foot moves to 9 o'clock to make a kneeling stance but the technique is forward

**Gankaku:** step back and the technique is forward

**Hangetsu:** both first step and first technique are forward

**Meikyo:** step to left to make a kiba dachi and the technique is forward

The tally is 2 kata stepping forward, 3 to the back and 3 to the left. It is interesting that none of those 8 major kata start to the right side. So, it looks like going to the left is very popular but we need to examine this closer. In Kanku Dai the first step and the initial technique are done to the left. However, in Enpi and Meikyo the techniques are executed to the front even though the left foot is moved to the left.

With these statistics let's think why the ancient Okinawan masters picked a Tekki kata that starts to the right side and uses only *kiba dachi*. This is a very interesting topic but we will not go too deeply into this as we are trying to figure out why all Heian kata start to the left.

Whether you go to the left or right, one thing is clear, that Itosu did not make the first move go forward or backward. He chose to go sideways in all five Heian, why? The hint is Tekki as it also starts sideways. I believe this was clearly intended and that the deep understanding of kinesiology by the Okinawan master is evidenced here. Let's look at three directions and evaluate why he chose sideways. It is pretty easy to figure out why he did not pick stepping back. He did not want to teach the beginners to retreat, obviously. It is of course best to move forward. OK then, why he did not pick stepping forward?

Take a look at the shape of a foot. We all know it is long in length and narrow in the width. By examining the bone structure, the shin bone or tibia is placed not in the center but rather closer to the heel. Our walking ability seems so natural that we do not think about how we walk. The mechanism of bipedalism is truly a complex and precise one. The front part of our foot is purposely longer because it is designed to make it easier for us to stay standing upright. This is why it is easier to fall backward than to forward. You can experiment with this easily by feeling the difference in your balance to the front and to the rear. Indeed stepping forward takes some effort. This is exactly why short-distance runners have a gadget to bring their heels high and why they need to lean forward so much to start quickly.

I am sure you agree that a quick start is critical for 100 meter running when you are racing for a difference of 0.01 of a second to win or lose. Believe it or not, this quick start is as much or even more critical in karate. Wouldn't it be, if you were fighting for your life? However, in a karate fight we do not have a gadget to raise our heels nor can we lean forward as much as in a 100 meter run.



In a different chapter I explained the special mechanism in the initial form of Bassai Dai with the analogy of the Tower of Pisa. That mechanism in Bassai Dai is there to teach practitioners how to shift forward quickly. This is a highly technical movement. Therefore, the ancient masters chose to make the first move to the side, in the beginners' kata; Tekki and Heian. You can experiment with this to check which way is faster, to make a step by moving your left foot



to the front or by moving it to the left. If you lean sideways you will know that there is little support or resistance by the leg muscles to slow your move. You can feel that the Achilles tendon does not stop the fall to the side. Besides, taking a stance, especially *neko ashi dachi* (eventually *kokutsu dachi*), to the side is anatomically easier than making it to the front. As we are so used to stepping to the front in our normal life activities we feel strange if we have to step to the side. However, by repeating this side shift movement you can learn how to shift smoothly. This quick-shifting ability is one of the most important learning points of the Tekki kata. The ancient masters are telling us through Tekki, "If you have no unnecessary resistance in the initial move you can shift to the side very quickly." Once we learn how to do this to the side we can translate the technique to forward movement. And the first kata after Tekki is Bassai Dai, to learn how to shift forward quickly. This learning method is so excellent and when I discovered this fact I was honestly shocked by the depth of the ancient masters' physiological understanding. Some devil's advocates may say, "OK, I agree that shifting sideways is fast but shifting backwards is also easier and faster than going forward." This is true and the first step of some kata, such as Jion, Jutte and Gankaku, is backwards. I have already discussed in another chapter why moving back is a bad choice in fighting. This is the major reason why I am against *sanbon* and *gohon kumite* for intermediate and advanced students. The ancient masters knew this, of course, so they did not emphasize the step back and did not pick it for the initial kata. When we understand the mechanism better we do not step back in Jion, Jutte and Gankaku. In fact, we sink down in position, with one foot stepping back, more or less, for support. So, Itosu understood the importance of Tekki as the initial kata for karate beginners. However it can be extremely difficult to perform correctly, particularly the arm techniques. Thus, he decided that it was not appropriate for children in the public school PE program and that a different type of kata was needed. This is why an introductory kata, Heian, was created and introduced to the public school system in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As all the Tekki kata start to the right side, Itosu chose to start all the Heian kata to the left to create balance.



Whichever Heian kata you perform, your left foot must not pivot as you take your first step. What must happen first is the sliding of your hip joints so the hip or mid-section of your body will be slightly pushed to the left while the upper body is erect and your shizentai feet are unmoved. This has the effect of getting into an unbalanced state of balance (the details of this are covered in another chapter). Before too much body weight falls onto the left leg you must take a quick step to your left. It is interesting to note that the first stance of Heian Shodan is *zenkutsu dachi*, while for the other Heian, (Nidan to Godan), the first stance is *kokutsu dachi*. I believe this was also intentional on the part of Itosu. In the original Pin-an kata, they did not have *kokutsu dachi*. It was all *neko ashi dachi*, or cat stance. He wanted to put a more challenging stance, *zenkutsu dachi*, in the simplest kata, Shodan, since the *neko ashi dachi* stance is short and it is made more readily.

Now that you understand the purpose of the first steps in the Heian and Tekki kata, I hope you will appreciate and enjoy them more when you perform them.

押忍

# CHAPTER THREE

## 第三章

# HEIAN BUNKAI MYSTERIES

## 平安形分解の謎

# 平安

Believe it or not when I learned Heian kata for the first time in Japan some fifty years ago, bunkai was never taught to us in the class. When I started to teach in the US and visiting different dojo in the 70's I found that a lot of strange bunkai were being taught in many dojo. By "strange" I mean the bunkai to be unrealistic and almost unusable. Of course, there are different levels of bunkai for a certain specific technique therefore I admit there can be many different interpretations. In short, if a technique works then we can say that it is an acceptable bunkai. However, some widely accepted are not realistic and I feel strongly the better interpretations should be taught, thus that is exactly what I wish to do here. I will bring up the unrealistic bunkai then I will offer a better interpretation or a bunkai in each Heian kata.

## **(1) Three successive rising blocks in Shodan**



There is a sequence of three age uke in Heian Shodan. In my previous book, Shotokan Myths, I have already mentioned about the "strange" bunkai in a well known organization's video tape. In this video, the attacker attacks with mae geri followed by jodan punch. The defender blocks with gedan barai and jodan kaishu age uke. This part is fine but what is strange is the following two steps.

The attacker in fact steps back to give the second and the third punches as the defender steps forward to block with age uke. Do you not think it strange for anyone to steps back to give a punch, especially two times in a row? Then the last age uke was interpreted as the joint attack technique to the opponent jodan oi zuki arm. As an interpretation this is doable but not realistic as the joint attack was done slowly and then the attacker was released. First, let's figure out why jodan age uke was performed three times in a row. This means there are several different interpretations which are possible for this simple technique of jodan age uke. So, it is not three steps of jodan age uke as the attacker is stepping back. We need to learn at least three different uses of the technique. Before I got into the actual interpretations I must explain one other thing about the names for the techniques. Unbelievable it may sound to most of the western readers but the names were invented only 100 years ago when it was introduced in the public school. Until that time the teacher would only show the technique and say "this technique is done this way, that a way, etc". Therefore, there was no relationship between the tehcniques which we understand as jodan age uke and the very name. I hope I am not confusing the readers but this is a very important point and the readers must understand. Let me explain why it is important. If you hear "jodan age uke" you have a set mind how it is done and what it is for. This is exactly what the Okinawa masters did not want because that particular movement can be other techniques rather than fixed in jodan age uke. In fact, in shodan these are three different counter attacks. The only age uke would be the very first left open hand age uke right after gedan barai performed in the 6<sup>th</sup> step. Even though you step three times forward, the correct interpretation is to have three options of jodan counter attacks. The first coiunter idea is a rising hammer fist to the opponent neck or chin. The second counter idea is a hook punch to the side of the opponent's head. The third one can be a jodan nobashi zuki (a punch that comes from center of the body line rather than from a hip) to opponent's chin. All three applications are done with the concept that within the first move the front open hand will block the jodan attack then grab the wrist followed by a step forward move with a counter. If you are not familiar or have not done these applications in the ippon kumite training I suggest you include these in the kumite syllabus as they are very usable

and effective.

## **(2) First technique of Nidan**



This move is named as jodan uchi uke (front arm) and jodan kamae (rear arm). I explained the names of the techniques earlier. They really do not describe the real techniques. However, many practitioners and instructors are mistakenly lead to believe they are exactly what the names tell. If you believe the purpose of the rear arm is only jodan kamae then you underestimated the effectiveness of karate techniques. This is definitely not an extra protection of the face. The better interpretation is this rear arm is the jodan uke. Then what is the front arm? This is in fact a jodan upper cut to the opponent's chin. The fist is turned to look like an uke but the original move was to set the front hand in an upper punch position (palm of the fist facing to the defender). You can see the proof if you study Shito-ryu's Pin-an. They kept the original hand position with the front fist doing jodan age zuki. Yes, the front hand is not a block but to punch the opponent. The first move is a very technically challenging move but a very true karate move where a block and a counter are performed simultaneously. Doesn't it make better sense?

## **(3) Second technique of Nidan**



In the same bunkai video, the defender is expected to catch a chudan punch by this technique. Please try this with an opponent and experience how unrealistic this interpretation is. The better or more realistic interpretation is the simultaneous block and attack technique just like the one we discussed for the very first move.



For this second technique, the front hand is jodan soto uke or nagashi uke and a simultaneous chudan ura zuki by the rear hand. Executing a block and a counter attack simultaneously is the most effective and efficient method. Wouldn't you favor this concept over the "unique" and circus like technique of catching a punch with both forearms?

## **(4) Kosa uke in Sandan**



This is an interesting technique and I have a clear remembrance that I had a tremendous difficulty in executing this technique correctly when I first learned this kata though it was so

many years ago. The technique is named as gedan barai and chudan uchi uke at the same time. Some practitioners call this as kosa uke, however, I do not agree with the term.

Kosa means cross and looking at these techniques from the side, it may look like crossed (picture left) but in fact the arms are not crossed. The gedan and jodan crossed arm blocks we see in Heian Godan are real kosa uke though I do not believe the true bunkai for them is blocks (I will cover this later in this chapter) So, I challenge that this is not a multi blocks technique. It is possible though uncommon for an attacker to throw a morote chudan zuki. It is more realistic to believe the attacker extends his arms to grab the defender's chest lapels. Even if you believe one of those attacks; double fist attack or grabbing the lapels, it is unrealistic and even humorous to block those two arms with one chudan uke and one gedan barai. If you do not believe this I suggest you try it with your dojo mate. The problem arose because of the name of the technique again. The name is uke but this is not a combination of two blocks. The mystery disappears when you remember that a key to the karate technique is a combination of a block and a simultaneous counter attack. Bunkai goes like this; after the first chudan ude uke (left arm), your left wrist is grabbed by the opponent. The explanation for the kosa uke: first twist the left arm inward then bring right forearm from outside and rotating outwardly to break the wrist grubbing. Right after the grubbing is broken you will immediately counter attack with right jodan uraken uchi. This is why the stance is heisoku dachi (closed feet stance) which can be, in the application time, heiko dachi or sanchin dachi.

### **(5) The first technique in Yondan**

I have already explained the first move of Nidan. The first move in Yondan is kaishu (open hand) instead of fist. So, I am sure the readers will immediately guess the correct bunkai. Yes, the rear arm is jodan block and the front shuto is used to spear hand the neck or eyes. Here, I need to emphasize that I am not discounting a popular interpretation of using the front arm as jodan uke. It is doable to first block and then throw a counter attack with the rear shuto though it is not included in the kata's move. However, the timing of such bunkai will be two sequential movements or a tempo of two which is slow. The bunkai I am presenting is simultaneous (block and counter at the same time) which is a tempo of one and more effective technique. The mystery is resolved when we realize these two arm movements are a simultaneous technique of block and counter. However, I still wondered why the first two moves (kokutsu dachi to left and right sides) are done slowly. I wondered if there was any meaning to this. When you review Pinan Yondan by Shito-ryu and Shorin-ryu these two moves are done fast or at a normal speed just like the first move of Nidan. Interestingly, it is done at a fast speed by Wado-ryu which branched off from Shotokan in the early 30's. So Funakoshi taught the first two moves at the regular speed in the 20's then somewhere in the mid or late 30's he decided to slow these movements. As far as I know there is no written document explaining why he changed the speed so we can only guess. I tried to imagine him teaching this kata to hundreds of university students. Funakoshi's favorite kata was Kosokun (Kanku Dai) and interestingly the first two moves are identical in these two kata. In the original kata, Kosokun the stance for these two moves was neko ashi dachi. After he changed the stance to kokutsu dachi he felt the difficulty of executing these two techniques in high speed. By being a conscious educator he decided to slow these two moves down in Yondan. By doing this the students will learn to coordinate the leg movement (getting into kokutsu dachi) and the arm technique. He hoped the students will learn these first two moves of Heian Yondan better by doing them slowly. He probably believed that the students will do Kanku Dai better once they reach shodan level. Again this is only my speculation and there is no proof if he had felt this way.

### **(6) Yoko ke-age/jodan uraken uchi combination in Nidan and Yondan**



This combination is found in both Heian nidan and yondan. In fact, this is done the same way in other kata such as Kanku Dai, Gankaku, etc. First of all I need to explain why I brought up this

combination. Frankly for many years I could not understand the purpose of uraken that is executed simultaneously with the kick. We were encouraged to kick high, jodan then where am I attacking with my uraken? If the kick is to the mid-section and if the opponent is bent over then I could possibly see my uraken hitting the opponent. However, there are two points that puzzled my understanding. One is the definite shortness of my arm. When you kick an opponent with a yoko ke-age it is impossible to reach the opponent with your uraken. The second point is why it must be done simultaneously. It was a mystery for a long time as bunkai was never fully explained to me. First I thought maybe the punch is a follow up technique after the kick but we are told to execute these two techniques at the same time. So, I investigated by reviewing Pin-an kata of Shito-ryu and Shorin-ryu. By reviewing those kata you notice that the kata do not have yoko geri. Instead the kick in those kata is all mae geri so you will discover that in the original Heian the kicks were mae geri in Nidan and Yondan. Funakoshi introduced several new techniques after his migration to Tokyo and yoko ke-age was one of them. Chapter 1 of this book covers the subject of why Funakoshi introduced the techniques that were not found in Okinawa. It is a very interesting subject from the Shotokan karate history perspective and there we find many not well known facts. We will not go into the subject of why in this chapter but I will cover the disparity that arose from the changes he made. In Shito-ryu Pin-an Shodan (Heian Nidan) we find that the technique is chudan uchi ude uke (inside forearm block) with chudan mae geri. If you have a chance I suggest you go to Youtube and examine it yourself. If you look closely you will find the block is done before a kick and this timing makes sense when you consider its bunkai. You block first then quickly counter attack with a chudan mae geri. Interestingly, for Yondan the arm is straight and looks like chudan kentsui uchi. This technique makes sense as I assume it was originally a gedan barai before mae geri. As the modern day karate became popular and the high kicks became popular and common. With this change with the kick, it is natural that the blocking arm had to be placed higher as well.

When Funakoshi changed the kick to yoko ke-age he had to change the arm technique accordingly. The reason is quite obvious. Try to do a yoko uchi uke with yoko ke-age. You will find it almost impossible to execute this combination. With a side kick an extended arm works much easier and better. Then why did he not keep the gedan barai or kentsui uchi but replaced it with uraken uchi? The puzzle continued. In fact, kentsui uchi is an easier technique to do with yoko ke-age than uraken uchi but he chose uraken. I concluded that Funakoshi chose uraken uchi as it is a snap movement which works better with a snap kick. Unfortunately, the bunkai concept went out of the window with yoko ke-age and uraken for all kata. In the popular bunkai video uraken is used to block the chudan zuki. They got the right idea but the performer missed both punches, however it was done so quickly so no one probably noticed this error. To do this technique correctly all they had to do was a gedan barai before a yoko ke-age. Another option is, of course, to follow this method and try to block a chudan zuki with your uraken uchi. This is difficult to do but it can be done. With a yoko geri, I believe the best interpretation would be chudan tsukami uke first and followed by yoko ke-age. First you block chudan zuki with gedan barai then grab the opponent's wrist then pull your arm in as you execute a yoko ke-age to opponent's arm pit or to chin. I suggest the readers to try all these different options and see which one is workable and realistic.

## **(7) Kagi zuki in Godan**



I am not an expert in Judo but took 4 years of Judo and attained shodan rank before I switched to karate when I was in high school. When my sensei asked if I could figure out a bunkai for it I knew this was a throw. I practiced thousands of times to do this throw called Uki

goshi (raising hips). See the illustration (right) and notice that the feet of the throwing guy are in heisoku dachi. Notice this technique is done slowly, unlike kagi zuki done in Tekki in which it is done quickly and powerfully. So this is an indication that this technique is not a kagi zuki though the end form looks like it. It is a slower moving technique, a throwing technique. In the same bunkai video it was interpreted as an elbow joint attack and I consider this as a good option. However, you will notice that the first technique (3<sup>rd</sup> move) was completely ignored.



If they had included the Uki goshi throw in the bunkai it could have been more beneficial to the audience. Take a look at this interesting photo (left) of Funakoshi doing the bunkai. What do you think of this?

## 8) Kosa uke or Juji uke



Gedan kosa uke is typically taught as a pressing block to mae geri. Yes, it is possible if the kicker is extremely slow. You might say, "I can do it with the kicker at full speed." OK maybe so in ippon kumite but would you use this in jiyu kumite? I am not saying this is a wrong bunkai. If it works then it is a good bunkai. I am only saying there is a better interpretation which is not popular. The inside (or bottom) arm is a block, either gedan barai or osae uke to chudan zuki, and the upper arm is indeed used for gedan or chudan zuki. As I have mentioned this before but the original idea of karate techniques was block and counter in one move.



Then how about the second juji uke with open hand? In a popular bunkai is an interpretation of a jodan block using both hands. Now what you have to remember here is that the attacker did mae geri first and it was supposedly blocked by gedan juji uke. Try this combination with your dojo colleague. The attacker's jodan punch has to be very slow or he gives a long pause before the punch in order for your jodan block to be able to catch the punch. In other words this is not a realistic technique. Besides why would you use both hands to block a jodan punch and make your mid-section completely exposed? This cannot be a very wise move. So let's go back to the original concept of the Okinawa karate bunkai which was block and counter done at the same time. Once you understand this then it is very easy to figure this out. The top hand (right hand in the picture above) will do the open hand jodan age uke and the lower hand (left hand in the picture) does the shuto uchi to the attacker's throat. Another more aggressive interpretation is the shuto kosa uchi to the neck. In other words, using both shuto you will

strike upward to the opponent's neck in a scissor form. This technique will strike the jugular veins on both sides of the neck and can be a very dangerous attack but I think this is what the ancient Okinawa masters had in mind for bunkai.

### **(9) The jump in Godan**



Here is another commonly misinterpreted technique. Just like the picture here you are to jump over a stick that was aimed at your legs. That bunkai video shows the same concept. But ask yourself where you would attack if you had a stick like this. Is attacking the legs your first choice? If I had a stick I will strike the guy on the head or the body. Unless you are a superman you cannot jump over such a strike. You would say, "But this is a jump and our teacher told us to jump as high as we could." Here is another miss-interpretation of karate techniques similar to the case of a miss-match between the technique name and actual application. We find many jumps in kata and many of them are indeed jumps such as Kanku Dai and Gankaku with kicks, and Meikyo with elbow strike. However, some are throws. Then why did the kata creator pick a jump to "hide" a throw? It is an easy guess. They wanted to put some leg exercises to strengthen the legs. A bunkai for a jump in Enpi is also a throw. Let's get back to this technique in Godan. The technique right before the jump is upper cut to the chin and this is perfect as you will grab the opponent's lapels with the punch hand and the other hand will grab the sleeve then throw him.



Remember the throw, Uki goshi from the kagi zuki interpretation before? This throw is another popular throw in Judo and it is called Morote sei nage (left).

A throw makes better sense when you figure out the technique that comes right after the jump; you will land with gedan kosa uke with kosa dachi. If you prefer to interpret the jump as a jump over a stick then how do you interpret this technique? Some told me, "The staff attacker is kicking mae geri so I block with the cross arm block." I have to call this another circus act. I am sorry but everybody knows that is not realistic. If you interpret this jump as a throw then the mystery disappears. After you threw your opponent and if you would not let go of the lapels and the sleeve you are grabbing your arms can cross like this picture (right).



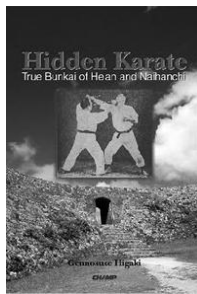
Or you can add the interpretation that after the throw you will finish the opponent off with a punch to his face. You may not like an idea of punching a person on the ground but in karate concept it makes perfect sense to finish the opponent with a punch after a throw. Here again I suggest the readers to try this bunkai and see if it makes better sense. You need to be very careful how to throw your karate colleague unless he is familiar with the Judo fall. You could hurt your colleague badly if you throw him right on to the hard floor. I suggest you will use the rubberized mats that are used for wrestling or gymnastics to prevent any possible injury.

### **(10) Manji uke in Godan**





This uke is popular as we found it in many other kata such as Jion, Jutte and Gankaku. The front arm is easy as this is gedan uke which we know well. The mystery is the rear arm. This is jodan uchi uke so the most popular bunkai is to block a jodan punch. The worst interpretation I have seen is the double block with two attackers from front and back. But I have to call this a circus act again if it is done while you are looking forward. Do you have an eye on the back of your head? How can you block a punch that is coming from your rear? You may say, "You will look back when you block the punch". This is exactly how it was shown in the bunkai video but then the performer let the attacker go without any counter. Is this realistic? This video did a great job in bunkai for two manji uke except for this small action. Before the manji uke you will cross the arm which was interpreted as jodan nagashi uke and gedan open hand strike then throw the opponent. I believe this is a very appropriate bunkai. The rear arm is held high not because it had to do a jodan uke but to emphasize that this arm had to be pulled not only strongly but also high to throw the opponent. In other words, this high rear arm is an exaggerated form for kata. However, if you feel you want to see another option instead of throwing the following can be considered. The first move is same (upper hand jodan nagashi uke and lower hand open hand gedan attack) then the attacker threw the second jodan punch. Your gedan hand will come up and give jodan nagashi uke and the other hand will give either chudan or gedan punch.



I found it extremely difficult to describe these bunkai moves in English due to the lack of language skills. I hope the readers got at least the ideas and would try those interpretations to see if they make sense. Again, there can be many levels of interpretations or bunkai to a technique so certainly my interpretations are not the only ones that are correct and realistic. If you are interested in bunkai there is an excellent book, Hidden Karate, written by Egaki Gennosuke which has been translated in English. My interpretations are somewhat different from his but the basic concepts I learned from my sensei coincide with what he presents in this book.

I want to conclude this chapter with a few more comments. As I said before kata is only a model with various popular techniques. We must know the bunkai but there are many different kinds and depths of interpretation. All are good if they work not only in a dojo but also in a real life situation. We must not be trapped in a fixed notion of a particular bunkai. We must not spend our time in a "circus" technique. Most of the karate techniques are simple and direct. I hope more shotokan practitioners will spend time in studying bunkai thus understanding kata better leading to a better appreciation of this treasure that was handed down to us over hundreds of years.

押忍

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **第四章**

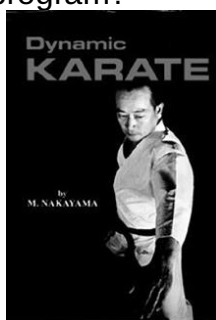
## **MIKAZUKI GERI, AN EXTINCT KICK?**

### **三日月蹴りの謎**



We know mikazuki geri means a crescent kick. We are familiar with this kick if you are an advanced student as we find it in Heian Godan and Bassai Dai. This kick is found not only in those two kata but also in Meikyo and Hangetsu. So you can say this is a popular kick in our kata, in fact the third most popular kick in Shotokan kata after mae geri and yoko ke-age. OK, you know that. You will now ask "So, what is the problem?" There is no problem at all but I have had a nagging question and I want to share this with you today. Here is the question. How often do you practice this kick in kihon training at your dojo? If your answer is "Many times" or "Often" then your kihon program is very comprehensive and your training is well-rounded. But probably most of the readers will have to confess by saying "not often" or even "never". Truthfully, how is it at your dojo? My next question is "Do you know the reason or reasons why it is not included in the kyu syllabus in your organization? Go ask your sensei but I doubt he/she can give you a satisfactory answer. Please do not read this article then test your sensei by asking this question. You have to promise not to do this before you read on.

At most of the dojos, the first kick a white belt student learns is mae geri, front kick. As soon as he gets promoted to an 8<sup>th</sup> kyu he learns other kicks such as yoko ke-age, side snap kick, yoko kekomi, side thrust kick and mawashi geri, roundhouse or round kick. He is expected to practice all those kicks in the regular kihon training. However, most likely he will not learn mikazuki geri and ushiro geri, back kick. You will agree that ushiro geri is too difficult for a blue belt student but I have always wondered why mikazuki geri is not taught. Have you ever wondered why we practice mawashi geri often but yet mikazuki geri, a similar kick to mawashi geri is not included in the regular kihon program?



Unfortunately, I do not have access to the exam syllabus of all Shotokan organizations. But by reviewing that of JKA and JKS which I happen to have the access, we find this particular kick is not included in the kihon requirements. It's no wonder mikazuki geri is not included in regular dojo training of those two major organizations. To support this point, let's look at the "Bible" of JKA, Dynamic Karate authored by Masatoshi Nakayama. We will find how much space is given to mikazuki geri compared to mawashi geri. As suspected, mikazuki geri received only half a page (p.158) whereas mawashi geri enjoys three full pages (pp.155-157). Obviously the author considered mawashi geri much more important than Mikazuki geri, as derived from the space allocation. For your information, yoko geri received 5 pages (pp.150-154) and even Ushiro geri got two full pages (pp.159-160). The only other kick that received only half a page was gyaku mawashi geri, reverse round house kick (shared the same page, 158 with Mikazuki geri). So you can easily guess the importance that was given to Mikazuki geri by Nakayama.

Let me quote what he says about this kick from Dynamic Karate:

"Mikazuki-geri (crescent kick)

*When an opponent attempts to attack with a punch, block his forearm as he steps close and counterattack with the crescent kick to his abdomen or groin. In this instance, kick with the ball of the foot. The crescent kick is sometimes used as a block. For example, when the opponent attempts a punch to your body, kick his forearm to the side as he attacks. Use the sole of the foot to apply the block.*

*Important points:*

*The course the kicking foot travels is shorter in the crescent kick than in the round kick. Another difference is that in the crescent kick it is unnecessary to raise the leg to the side before kicking. The kick can be delivered directly from the original position on the ground. It follows, then, that compared with the round kick, the crescent kick is less powerful, but lends itself better to a surprise attack."*

As you can see, the amount of explanation for Mikazuki geri in this book is unfortunately very little. In addition, only gedan and chudan applications were mentioned but jodan was omitted. I do not know why the author did not include jodan application. Just like a mawashi geri, this kick is most effective when it is delivered to the face level as the kicking course is horizontal at the time of impact.

Now we must compare these two kicks more clearly and identify the differences. We need to check next if there is any relationship between those two kicks or if they are two totally different kicks. Hopefully, we may be able to discover the apparent reasons why mawashi geri is commonly practiced but Mikazuki geri isn't.

### **Mawashi geri (回し蹴り)**



Let us look at the mechanism of mawashi geri which we practice often in our kihon.



(Tanaka: mawashi geri)

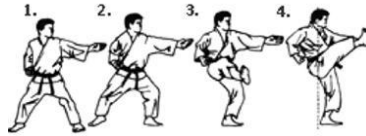
First you get in a good zenkutsu dachi. Then, you will need to shift your weight to your front leg or supporting leg as you need to lift your rear or kicking leg up. The instructors will give you a very interesting direction next. He will say "Lift your foot behind you." So this means you will be standing on a one leg position with your rear foot up in the air but tucked behind you. Then they will tell you to rotate your knee (kicking side) along with your hips in a horizontal way. The teachers will also tell you to rotate your supporting foot outward (see the drawing above) so that you can have a full hip rotation. He may also encourage you to swing your arms in a counter direction to your hip and kick rotations to give an extra twisting power to your kick. So if you listen to your instructor and if you execute this kick exactly how he tells you to do, then boom!, you will have a very powerful kick. If you try this kick on a large sand bag it makes a great sound. Bang! Yes, it sounds powerful.

Well, in execution, we may not be able to bring our foot to the rear as the instructors would demand but we try like heck to lift our kicking side knee high so the tucked leg will be poised at a horizontal position. We practice this hundreds or maybe thousands of times. The tournament competitors love to practice this kick as it is a useful kick in a shiai. Indeed, mawashi geri is the second most popular kick after mae geri to score a point. World renowned Masahiko Tanaka's mawashi geri was very impressive and he won the world championship several times with his signature kick in the 70's. His kirikaeshi (switching hips) mawashi geri was so fast and beautiful. Yes, this is some 30 years ago so many of the younger generation readers have not seen his technique. I believe some instruction clips are available on YouTube.

Back to Mikazuki geri: Now, let us look at the mechanism of mikazuki geri. Notice you will execute this kick from a kiba dachi position in Heian Godan, Bassai and Meikyo. In Hangetsu

we do this kick from kokutsu dachi. Isn't it interesting that it is not executed from zenkutsu dachi? So what does this mean? There is definitely a reason behind it and I will share my thought on this later. Let us continue looking at the mechanism of this kick. Another unique point or requirement for this kick in all kata is that you are supposed to set your front hand. And this hand becomes a stationary target and you are expected to kick it and supposed to make a good slapping sound. This is unique as we do not do this for any of the mae geri or yoko geri in kata. Do you not wonder why? We will discuss the possible reasons for this particular requirement in the section below.

### **Why only kiba dachi and kokutsu dachi are used?**



What is common between those two stances? Both of them are straight stances that hide the groin area. In Okinawa they discouraged all kicks to start out. There are several reasons for discouraging kicks. One of them is obviously the poor balance from standing on one leg. The other is the speed of a kick is much slower than that of a hand technique. Lastly, but most importantly related to our subject here, the kicks tend to expose the groin area and this was considered to be undesirable in a kumite situation. This is why the only kick that was recommended or found in the original kata was mae geri and aimed at only gedan and never jodan. When Funakoshi sensei learned Shuri-te kata in Okinawa, most of the kata he learned did not have yoko geri. For instance, yoko geri of Heian Nidan and Yondan were mae geri. Take a look at Pinan (old name for Heian) of Shito ryu and Shorin ryu of Okinawa. They still do those kata with mae geri. So, it makes sense to deliver mikazuki geri from those straight stances. In either of those two stances, with the delivery of the kick, the groin area will have minimum exposure. Another more refined reason why those two stances are chosen for Mikazuki is the hip position of those stances. As Mikazuki will need an extra hip rotation at the end of the kick these stances give more hip rotation than zenkutsu.

### **Why must a kick hit an extended hand?**

There are at least two good reasons. The first reason: The extended arm with the target hand signifies that the kicker needs to grab the opponent's sleeve or clothes for two purposes. One is to assist the kicker's balance as he initiates the kick and the other is to pull or yank your opponent towards you to get the maximum impact when the kick lands.



The second reason: Mikazuki geri is kekomi (thrusting kick) and the impact must be delivered horizontally (aimed to solar plexus or head). This is a different kind of kekomi from yoko kekomi where the leg is extended fully in the direction of the kick. On the other hand, it is extremely difficult to stop Mikazuki in mid-air because of the way this kick is executed. Try and see if you can stop a mikazuki geri without hitting your hand. Yes it can be done but I am sure you found it difficult. Well in fact, I have seen some students miss their hand during this kick and they literally lost their balance. So, now you know this "slapping a hand action" is needed to stop this kick in the air.

So, the points I listed above are the practical reasons for the unique requirements of mikazuki geri. Then you will ask if we can we do mikazuki geri from our most popular stance, zenkutsu dachi. Of course we can. You deliver the kicking leg as though you are going to do mae geri then at the half-way point, (to be more accurate I should say "somewhere in the middle") you will rotate your hips and change the direction of the kick from vertical to horizontal. This is more challenging than the same kick from kiba dachi obviously because you will have less hip turning angle from zenkutsu dachi but it is very possible. Besides, from a zenkutsu stance one can easily execute a mae geri and that would be the most effective kicking technique.

## What are the differences between these two kicks?

First of all, mikazuki geri does not require the knee to be tucked up. The kicking leg is kept fairly straight and swung without a snap. This technique is similar to that of Furi-ken (swing arm strike which was a favorite technique of late Asai sensei).

Secondly, the whole foot instead of only a part (i.e. ball or heel) will land on the target. The kicking foot is typically pointing upward or vertically in Mikazuki geri. While in Mawashi geri the kicking foot is typically horizontal whether the ball or the top side of the foot is used.

Thirdly, the hip rotation movements are completely different. In Mikazuki geri the initial hip move is closer to that of the hip movement of Mae geri than that of Mawashi. In other words, the pelvis will be tucked up instead of a hip rotation move. Then the whole leg will be brought up and in the middle the hip will have a small but quick horizontal whip action which will bring the leg inward (toward the target). Even at the moment of contact, the hip is still facing forward like in Mae geri. The power of the kick comes from the whipping of the leg at the last moment, similar to Furi-ken.

Let's look at Mawashi geri. We practice this kick more frequently, thus I assume the readers are more familiar with the kinesiology mechanism of this kick. The biggest difference is that the first movement of Mawashi geri is to lift your knee to the side as you intend to have a horizontal or an arc motion for its course. Obviously, the main power of the kick comes from the hip rotation and the reverse rotation of the upper body which creates a wringing motion then a sharp snapback of your kick. The hip will be totally rotated when you have an impact to the target.

So, we reviewed the mechanical differences between these two kicks which will lead you to contemplate and ask why mikazuki geri is not used in a tournament kumite. The answer is very simple and I am sure the readers can point out the reason. If you are a tournament competitor you can easily recognize that this technique is almost impossible to use to score a point. It is a kekomi so you will be disqualified if you execute a good mikazuki geri to jodan. If you go soft you will not get a point. This kick has no snapback thus it is very difficult for the judges to determine if your kick was good or ineffective. Regardless, from the tournament perspective it would be much easier to score a point thus "effective" if you use Mawashii geri in a shiai than a mikazuki geri.

Now here comes a big question. Were the Okinawan practitioners unable to do Mawashi geri or did they not have such a kick? The ancient Okinawan masters practiced karate for "life or death" combat. Is it then difficult to believe they never practiced Mawashi geri or did not use this kick? I know they knew and practiced this kick and I have proof. I purposely omitted mentioning the kata, Unsu. It is supposedly the most advanced kata of Shotokan (some argue that Hyakuhachiho, a forgotten shotokan kata, also known as Suparinpei in Shito-ryu and Gojuryu, is more complex and advanced). Unsu is the only kata out of all 26 JKA kata that has mawashi geri in it. If you are an advanced practitioner you know the particular technique that is executed after falling down on the ground. You will be laying on your right side bracing yourself with both of the forearms on the ground in front and kicking to the mid or lower section of the attacker. This is called de-ai (meeting face on) counter technique against an attacker who is attacking you with a strong oi zuki. I will discuss why mawashi geri is used in this context later in this article.

Let us examine first why the ancient masters did not deploy this kick in any other kata and kept it somewhat as a "hidden" technique. Here are a few reasons.

### (1) The exposure of the groin area with Mawashi geri



As I have mentioned before, Okinawan masters did not commonly include yoko geri in the kata. The yoko geri you see in Heian Nidan and Yondan were mae geri before Funakoshi changed it. In Shito-ryu, they still use mae geri in Pinan kata. Pinan is the Okinawan way of

pronouncing Heian and it is almost identical to Heian kata. The reason for avoiding yoko geri is the same, not to expose the groin area.

## (2) Visibility

The second biggest short coming of mawashi geri is its visibility compared to Mae geri and mikazuki geri. To do a mawashi geri, you need to tuck your knee to the side which increases the visibility significantly. In budo this is considered as a poor move or idea.

## (3) Technical complexity

The body mechanism of Mawashi geri is much more complex than that of Mae geri. To explain this mechanism in details we will need to spend much more space here, but this article is about Mikazuki geri and not Mawashi geri so I will skip this process here.

By investigating the Okinawan karate history we find the masters who were called “Keri no so and so” which means Master (his name) of kicks. A few names of those keri masters are Kinjo, Kiyatake and Ishimine. I am sure there were many others but unfortunately not much writing history was left by the ancient Okinawan for two major reasons and both of them are tied to “secrecy”. One is the secrecy towards the governing clan of Satsuma from Japan. They forced “no weapon” laws upon the native Okinawans and karate practice was also prohibited. The other secrecy comes from the fact each master guarded his techniques from his opponents or the other Okinawa masters. So now you see that Okinawa masters did not want to use mawashi geri openly or frequently, for the reasons described above. Then let’s get back to the earlier question. Why is mawashi geri used in Unsu which is supposedly the most advanced kata of JKA? The key to this question is its unique execution of this technique. This kick does not come from a normal stance like zenkutsu dachi but rather you fall to the ground first, then, execute this kick from the prone position. So we must ask a critical question (which you dared to ask your sensei), “Why would a person fall down like this to execute a kick? Isn’t that a crazy move? Give me one convincing reason why you need to fall down first before you execute a kick. You may say “Hey it is a surprise technique”. But I must counter by saying “It is a self-destructive move and not a wise one”. Some of you may say, “From the ground you can sweep the opponents’ leg and take him down. I have seen a demo done by Tanaka sensei doing that particular technique.” I have seen that demo too so, your claim is supported but what we must bring to your attention is how Tanaka sensei was positioned at the beginning of this demo. Yes, he was sitting in seiza (Japanese style kneeling position) and not standing. This is a critical point and it means he did not need to fall down as he was already “down”. He also did the technique differently from the way it is performed in Unsu. Specifically, he was not lying down but he had his kick supported by kneeling on the left leg and using one (left) extended arm to support the leaning upper body while he did his mawashi geri. We must note that neither his forearms nor hands were used to support his upper body as required in this kata. These requirements make it very difficult to perform this kick in an effective way.



In Unsu, when you get to the execution of this kick, you will realize another very interesting thing. We are told that we are to do mawashi geri but you will find it is not a real mawashi geri in the strict sense. It is actually closer to the movement of mae geri. So what does this mean?

This is the typical way for the ancient masters to hide a certain technique in a kata. You can practice bunkai all you want from the standing position as it is done in a kata but the real bunkai is from the seiza position as that is the typical way of sitting in Japan. You will realize a mae geri is very hard to execute from seiza even though Asai sensei showed it can be done. From this position mawashi geri is much easier and more effective. Another merit of this execution is how it looks. By looking at this kick, an outsider would not recognize this kick as a mawashi geri as it looks closer to a mae geri, so you can hide a mawashi geri in this kata. There was no text book in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to describe each kata movement. It was only the early part of last century when the late Funakoshi published karate books where he introduced kata with pictures that resulted in a revolution in karate learning. Until then, each move was taught only through verbal instructions. So were the Bunkai.

Now, let's go back to the very first question. Is Mikazuki geri an extinct kick? By now the readers have enough information so I really do not need to answer the question. It is true that, in the tournaments I have participated in and observed over many years, I have never seen anyone executing Mikazuki geri in a kumite match let alone scoring a point for a Mikazuki geri. However, what I have witnessed in recent tournaments is a combination of mae geri and a smaller version of Mawashi geri, called a flop kick. This flop kick is a little snap kick that is generated by a quick hip vibration and a whipping of the foot which is very similar to the mechanism used in Mikazuki geri. Since it is almost impossible to score a point with Mikazuki geri, the tournament fighters have improvised and created a mini or modified Mawashi geri that they could score with especially if you can show a good snap back after the kick.

Even though Mikazuki geri in a strict sense is not seen or used in kumite matches, the mechanism of this kick has been adopted among competitors as I explained above. Since Mikazuki geri can be a dangerous kick, it is used only in a defensive movement such as a wrist or arm slap block against chudan zuki, if practiced at all. The real application is not like that at all. It is a stomping kick typically to jodan which is a knock out kick. The only person who could demonstrate this technique well was Asai sensei. He not only showed the variety of Furi ken techniques with his arms/fists but also Mikazuki geri as an attacking technique to jodan. Furi ken is effective and lethal but not commonly practiced in our dojo.

I hope the readers have realized that a Mikazuki geri can be used in a real fighting situation and can deliver a devastating effect. I also hope the readers will agree that mikazuki geri is far from either an extinct kick or an antique kick that is preserved only in a museum of kata. If you have not added Mikazuki geri in your kihon and kumite, maybe now you would want to add this kick to expand your repertoire of the kicking techniques.

押忍



# **CHAPTER FIVE**

## **第五章**

# **DISPARITY BETWEEN KATA AND KUMITE**

## **形と組手の関係の謎**

Have you ever noticed in our training that there is a big disparity between kata and kumite? In kata we are taught to always step forward while we learn to retreat in kumite (particularly sanbon and gohon kumite). It is true that a few kata (from JKA 26 kata) start with a step back such as Jion and Jiin but it is only one step back and never 3 or 5 steps. Of course, one exception is Chinte. I am aware that the very last three moves of this kata are a series of steps, or rather hops backward. I have written about this kata in the past and I have explained in Shotokan Myths why we have those mysterious hops in this kata. In short, I concluded from my research that these hops were added in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the original Chinte or Chintei did not have them.



Let's discuss the disparity by explaining about kata. Heian shodan is the most entry level kata (other than Taikyoku) and the moves consist of only stepping forward. Even going backward, like the third step, is done with a 180 degree turn instead of stepping back. The most interesting sequence in Heian shodan is the 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> steps where we do three jodan age uke by stepping forward. Now let's look at sanbon kumite. Here we are taught to step back three times while doing a blocking technique such as jodan age uke or gedan barai in each step. As far as I know, we are not taught to do the reverse. In other words, an attacker delivers jodan or chudan punch by stepping back while the defender blocks while stepping forward. If the instructor wants to be creative, I guess, it can be done. But try sanbon kumite with mae geri or yoko geri while stepping back. Does it make any sense? I am sure you will agree that it does not. An idea of an attacker stepping back in general really does not make sense and it is not realistic from the perspective of a "real" fight.



Then, how do we explain this vast difference? Kumite and kata are said to be the yin and yang of karate. So, one may explain, "We practice stepping forward movements in kata and we learn the retreating techniques in kumite". Some others claim kata is just a form and not fit for actual fighting. Some of those, in fact, have dropped kata from their training menu. Can these explanations be right? This subject certainly is a mystery and it must be fully explained. We discuss quite a lot about the history, bunkai and philosophy of kata and also the technique side of kumite. But I have not seen or heard much of the relationship between kata and kumite.

Have you ever imagined your kumite syllabus could be wrong (God forbid) or inappropriate? And have you ever questioned whether the requirements you have for kumite are really valid and useful? In other words, can you comfortably tell me that they will definitely develop your kumite skills by practicing them? Well, we need to do some investigation. I invite you to come along and investigate this mystery together.



Let us look at the official requirements set by the major organization, Japan Karate

Association (JKA). Shown below is a list of the kumite requirements taken from the 2009 edition of JKA Karate Techo (空手手帳). By the way, this Techo or notebook is a very interesting document. It contains not only the exam syllabus but also the names of the high dan ranks as well as the names of the country representatives. Mine is in Japanese but I hear it is also published in English. If you are a JKA member or if you have a friend in JKA, I suggest you get hold of a copy. You cannot buy one so you need someone who is high up in the organization to get you one. Even if it is an old edition it is worthwhile to review it. I highly recommend it.

OK, here is the JKA kumite syllabus in Karate Techo

(空手手帳);

- 9, 8 & 7 kyu: Gohon kumite (Jodan and Chudan)
- 6 kyu: Ippon kumite (Jodan and Chudan)
- 5 & 4 kyu: Ippon kumite (Jodan, Chudan and Maegeri)
- 3 kyu: Ippon kumite (Jodan, Chudan, Maegeri and Yoko kekomi)
- 2 kyu: Jiyu ippon kumite (Jodan, Chudan, Maegeri and Yoko kekomi)
- 1 kyu: Jiyu ippon kumite (Jodan, Chudan, Maegeri, Yoko kekomi and Mawashi geri)
- Shodan and above: Jiyu kumite (free sparring)

I am also familiar with the exam syllabus of JKS and WJKA. Their syllabuses are very similar to that of JKA, shown above. I can safely say that a similar syllabus is being used by most of the Shotokan organizations around the world. If the syllabus of your organization happens to be vastly different from this list then I wish to hear from you. I would like to hear why it is structured differently.

OK, let's get back to our discussion. After reviewing the exam syllabus shown above, do you see anything strange or wrong with what you see there? So, here is the big question; Do you think this syllabus is wrong? I usually keep the answer to the big question till the end of the article, but I am doing something different this time. Hold your breath, I give my answer now.



My years of research into this matter and 50 years of training convinced me that the kumite syllabus shown above is quite acceptable. In other words, the requirements in the syllabus are the right tools to test kumite skills. It is true that you may notice a few strange facts in the syllabus such as mawashi geri is not required until 1 kyu, and there are a few other odd things but they are not a big issue. Besides, the syllabus should be used only as a guideline. An examiner is allowed to make some minor modifications or adjustments as he/she gives an examination.

Well, if the exam syllabus is correct and if we are training under an appropriate program, then is the fault with the kata? Definitely not! For hundreds of years Okinawan masters could not have valued and practiced the kata if they were meaningless and unusable. It is my hope that what we will find in this article will help improve your kumite training in a significant way.

Our kumite syllabus is correct but let me ask you another question about our entry level requirements. Do you practice Gohon and Sanbon kumite during your regular training? I am sure your answer is yes and no problem there if you are 8<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> kyu. I say "Excellent. Keep up the good work." However, if you are a brown or a black belt, then I must tell you, "This may be a big problem for your kumite training". I can almost hear you say, "What's wrong with it?" I emphatically say, the advanced students must minimize if not totally avoid both sanbon and gohon kumite because this is the major cause for the disparity between kata and kumite. Do you believe this? I need to further explain so that the readers can judge if my claim makes

sense. If you are not satisfied with your kumite and I specifically mean only jiyu kumite or jiyu ippon kumite, I think it is worth reading the rest of this article.



Let us take a close look at the kihon kumite training syllabus in our regular training. In kihon kumite exercises, we all know that the attackers and the defenders face each other in a set distance where, by taking one step forward an attacker can literally punch a defender's face or body (we call it kihon distance). There are other kumite situations, namely keri or kicking and the point I am making can be applied to keri but we use punching in this article to explain my point. A defender starts from a natural stance, shizentai. To block an attacking technique, he needs to make a strong stance such as front stance, zenkutsu. To make such a stance, he is taught to step back. If he steps forward instead to make a stance he will run into the attacker and will not be able to execute a correct block and counter attack. So, a defender is taught to step back in gohon kumite, sanbon kumite as well as ippon kumite (one attack sparring). We all know this and as I said previously, if you are a 8<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> kyu, there is nothing wrong with this. The beginners have difficulty making a distance judgment and cannot make complex movements of stepping aside or forward. A defender feels comfortable with a step back motion in order to escape from an attacker who is stepping toward the defender. It is a very natural movement for them so; it makes sense to teach a white belt with Gohon kumite and or Sanbon kumite in this manner. Through kihon kumite they can learn the basic kumite techniques. When you become an intermediate such as 6th and 5th kyu your syllabus changes and you should focus on Ippon kumite (1 attack sparring) and less on sanbon and gohon kumite.



When you reach 3rd kyu or a brown belt rank, finally you will face Jiyu ippon kumite, semi free sparring. There are some challenges in different kumite models as you move up from other kihon kumite. Most of the students can transition well from gohon kumite to sanbon and ippon until they face Jiyu ippon kumite. In Jiyu ippon, both attacker and defender can freely choose their own distances and are free to move around. This freedom of position and distance is quite different from other kihon kumite where the distance is set and rather fixed. Initially and not surprisingly, the new brown belts show some difficulty in finding proper distance. They now find that the attacking side distance can be quite different from the defending side distance. Instead of one directional movement (typically the defender steps straight back to block a technique then deliver a counter attack) two opponents can move in any direction, not just backward for the defender and forward for the attacker. They can move sideways or reverse. In other words, the defender may decide to step forward as the attacker may choose to step backward. This concept of choosing the right distance or creating a favorite ma-ai is totally new and challenging to a freshly promoted 3 kyu student. Another big difference in Jiyu ippon is that the defender can move at any time whether it is during or after the attacking technique or even before the attacker moves in with a technique. So, a new element of timing is added to the challenge of selecting a correct distance.

Then, what do the new 3rd kyu students do when they are defending? They will, without fail, step back instead of moving to the side or moving forward. This is very natural as they learned how to block and counter by stepping back all the way through the different kumite models of gohon, sanbon and ippon. So the instructors will tell the defenders not to step back or escape

so much. But they are asking something very difficult because those students have been brain washed to step back as a defender all through their former exercises. Now you will say, "What is wrong with blocking and counter after you step back?" Let me answer by asking you this question. Do you know that stepping straight back is the worst option one can have? If you do not believe this, imagine when you need to dodge a car. What would you do? Would you step back in line with the car's direction of movement? I am sure you would not. You will want to move out of the way or you will be run over. Well this concept indeed applies in kumite where your opponent is charging at you. Now you can see that it is not such a good idea to step straight back and receive all the energy and power from the attacker. We must learn other and better options including how to step back in angles, to side step and even to step forward (but certainly you do not want to do this against a car). The best option is stepping forward but it is technically the most difficult thus most advanced one. And believe it or not, that is what we find in our kata. We will talk about this method later in the article.

Now I see two major problems in our dojo training. One is the sad fact that most of the instructors do not realize that kihon kumite namely, Gohon and Sanbon kumite, must be used only for the beginners. I have witnessed in many dojo that those exercises were commonly used with the intermediate students as well as the advanced students. Why does this happen? It is simply because Gohon (and Sanbon) kumite are easy kumite exercise for an instructor and the students get a lot of physical exercise. As a result, they get the false notion they had a lot of "good" kumite training. Unfortunately, by repeating this exercise, the notion of stepping backwards multiple times gets ingrained in their kumite tactics. As a result, when the students are involved in jiyu ippon or even jiyu kumite, one side charges in to attack as the other side takes a stepping back tactic to "defend" himself.

The second unfortunate fact that causes this problem is found, believe it or not, in kihon (basics) practice. If your dojo is a typical Shotokan style, I can imagine your kihon practice for the advanced students will go like this. First, you get in a kamae; left zenkutsu dachi and gedan barai, then jiyuna (free) kamae. The first kihon is probably kizami zuki (with front foot yori ashi) and followed by jodan oizuki. It is a simple combination but very popular. You will step forward and repeat 5, 6 or more times depending on how big your dojo is. Once you are at the end of the floor you will step back and do the following; jodan age uke or another uke and gyaku zuki. This type of exercise will continue from jodan to chudan and to kicks. But the general rule is you will do the attacking techniques as you advance forward and do the blocking techniques as you step back. Most kihon exercise is done in a very linear way, moving straight forward and straight back. This is very similar to the movements found in kihon kumite. So, the idea of stepping back when you block is repeatedly trained. If your instructor gives you a lot of zig zag, side stepping and tenshin, body rotation exercises in kihon then you are lucky. Unfortunately, I have rarely seen this type of kihon training in most of the dojo and the seminars I have visited.

OK, let's tackle the best option in kumite; to step forward to defend which is what we find in all kata we know. Why do you think the Okinawan masters formulated the kata that way? It is simply because they believed moving forward was the best option, therefore, they never included multiple steps back in any of the kata. Stepping straight back was an option, so we see a step back in Jion and Jutte but only one step.

Look at Heian Shodan's 6<sup>th</sup> movements, left gedan barai followed by three consecutive jodan age uke. Let me explain the bunkai with these techniques.

- 1) Left gedan barai: this technique is applied to a right chudan oi zuki or right maegeri attack.
- 2) Left jodan shuto age uke (in position): the attacker's right jodan zuki or left jodan gyaku zuki.
- 3) Step forward and right age uke: even though the name of this technique is uke but the application is an attack. First, your left shuto will grab opponent's wrist and pull him towards you which will upset his balance. Then you will use your right kentsui, hammer fist and strike the opponent's neck or under the chin. This technique can also be right mawashi uchi, roundhouse punch to opponent's head (aim for the temple).

You do the same technique (jodan age uke) three times to practice three different counter attacks and they are not blocking techniques. In kata, the defender is taught always to step forward. We know why and the answer is critically important. You will get the most power when you leverage your forward moving acceleration with your attacking techniques. It is like sticking your fist out of a car. You drive a car at, say, 50 km/hr. If your punch speed is say rather slow at 10 km/hr then your punch from a car will be 60 km/hr, incredibly six times faster than the speed of your punch. If you step back then you must stop first before you give a counter attack then your punch will not leverage a forward movement. Thus, your punch speed will be only 10 km/hr. Besides the speed, there will be the power of momentum that comes along with the movement going forward, while you get none from moving backward. If you deliver a counter attack while stepping back, your punching or kicking speed will be negated by the speed of moving backward. In addition, you will tend to lean back and that will require you to coil back forward before you can block or counter attack. That action will require more time and slow you down. As far as I know, all other styles such as Goju, Shito, Uechi, Ryuei, etc. share the same concept in their kata.

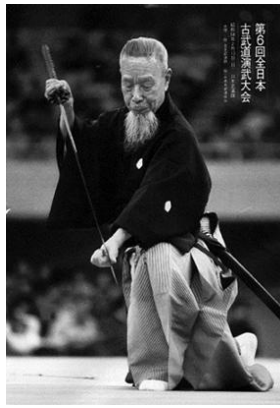


左側の方は船越義雄氏

Now we must look at the history of modern day karate to understand what has happened to Karate as we know it. By studying the history, we will find out how and why the original Okinawan karate has changed and why we have this huge disparity between kata and kumite/kihon.

No Shotokan karate practitioner will disagree that we have three main elements in our training and they are: kihon, kumite and kata. Of course, some people may include other exercises such as stretches and hojo keiko (muscle exercises) but the core of the training consists of those three elements I mentioned above. Was karate trained in this way 100 years ago in Okinawa? Many of you may already know that it was not. Funakoshi, the founder of Shotokan, did not learn karate in this manner when he studied under Azato and Itosu in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Azato and Itosu taught Funakoshi only kata. The kihon and kumite exercises as we know today were non-existent. The teachers, of course, taught Funakoshi bunkai applications but no kihon kumite like gohon kumite or even jiyu kumite, none whatsoever. Kihon and kumite were invented and introduced by Funakoshi after he migrated to Tokyo, Japan in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. I am sure you are curious how and why this change or new addition happened?

Many people know that Funakoshi started his teaching at the universities in Tokyo. He could not afford to establish an independent dojo for many years for both financial and political (mainly to Kodokan) reasons. So, he started with the college karate club idea and taught at many universities as the young men were very curious about this foreign martial art from Okinawa. Okinawa had just become a new prefecture of Japan but it was still considered foreign to most of the mainland Japanese people. For the first several years he taught only kata just the way he had been taught in Okinawa. Naturally those hot headed university boys were not satisfied with kata training only. They wanted to use Karate techniques in real fights and they wanted to do jiyu kumite.



Funakoshi prohibited all sparring and surely street fights. But the students were not convinced and they began to doubt the effectiveness of the techniques if trained only with kata. Some of the students challenged Funakoshi and asked if kumite is taught in Okinawa, maybe secretly or by the very advanced students. Funakoshi emphatically told them no. He said only kata was taught and the meaning of the movements were explained by bunkai. They eventually started to practice free sparring, but very secretly. However, one day Funakoshi caught some students free sparring. In fact, he got so upset that he resigned from the teaching position at this university dojo. At another university, some students took a long trip to Okinawa (took many days by boat from Tokyo to Okinawa in those days) to double check on how karate was being taught on the island. They found that it was true that the Okinawan practitioners did not have kumite and kihon in their practice menu. As a result, some of the creative students took some training ideas from Kendo and Judo. From Kendo they introduced free sparring using full protective gear. This developed into a new style, known as Nihon Kenpo.

It is also true that Funakoshi had a close relationship with Hakudo Nakayama (no relationship to Masatoshi Nakayama of JKA) who was the founder of the Muso Shinden ryu iaido (sword drawing). He was very well known among the martial artists in Japan as he is the only person to have received both Judan (10th degree) and hanshi (master instructor) ranks in kendo, iaidō, and jodo (staff) from the All Japan Kendo Federation. Hakudo saw Funakoshi's demonstration in Tokyo and he was so impressed he let Funakoshi use his dojo to teach karate. So, it is very natural to imagine he had a lot of exposure to kendo and its training.

As everyone knows, Funakoshi had to depend on the support from Kano, the founder of Kodokan judo. Kano probably was the most influential figure not only in the martial arts world but also in all athletic events and sports as he was the first Asian member of the International Olympic



Chojun Miyagi : 1888-1953

Committee (IOC) (he served from 1909 until 1938). In fact, he died on board at sea while he was returning from Egypt to Japan after attending an IOC conference in Cairo. Kano was someone who could not be ignored if you wished to start any kind of martial arts and sports activities let alone a dojo. Kano showed such interest in karate after seeing Funakoshi's demonstration, he visited Okinawa himself and spent two full days with Mabuni Kenwa (Shito ryu founder) and Miyagi Chojun (Goju ryu founder) learning the techniques and exchanging martial arts ideas.

Some of Funakoshi's students came from judo and it is natural to suspect they tried to introduce an idea from Judo called randori (free style throwing training) in which two practitioners work as a pair. Funakoshi accepted many ideas from Judo such as the karate gi (uniform) and a belt (Okinawan practiced in their street clothes or only in their pants). However, he refused to adopt the idea of Randori or free sparring.

He instead adopted a training method from Kendo, uchikomi (striking basic practice). In this exercise, one practitioner steps forward and gives a series of strikes to the opponent like you

would do in Gohon kumite. But the big difference is this Kendo opponent does not block or counter. The opponent simply steps back as the attacker advances so he just presents himself as a target. Nevertheless, our kihon kumite was developed in which a certain technique is called out and an attacker would step forward (five, three or one step) as he delivers an attacking technique. On the other hand, a defender steps back as he delivers a blocking technique and at the last step (fifth one in gohon kumite and third one in sanbon kumite) he executes a counter attack after the final blocking technique. This is exactly how our kihon kumite came about.

If the ancient masters believed the best moves to attack and defend was to move forward, why do we have this problem now? It certainly was not Funakoshi or Nakayama sensei's fault. They developed the curriculum that is appropriate for the different levels of students. I believe Funakoshi sensei taught Nakayama sensei this concept correctly.

Look, early JKA successfully produced many kumite greats who were exceptionally skillful like Oishi, Asai, Kanazawa, Enoeda, Tanaka and Yahara to name a few. In addition, by looking at JKA's kumite syllabus I can say Nakayama knew how kumite was to be developed among his students. Then, why are we not following the syllabus in our training? We are aware that some of the true bunkai for many kata were forgotten. This disparity of kata and kumite is another mystery.



I can only say that the teaching of moving forward has not been emphasized enough in the instructor's training. As a result, the current instructors are teaching the class incorrectly without knowing what they are doing. Then you may ask if it is a serious error. Well, it depends. This error will not harm anyone physically. It is not like an incorrect kick that would hurt one's knee or back. This is why this error is hard to get rid of, as no one complains. However, many advanced students face difficulty in doing bunkai correctly as most of them require a stepping forward motion. They also find themselves having difficulty when they transition to jiyu ippon and jiyu kumite. Then, what must we do? If you are an instructor, you must stop using Gohon and Sanbon kumite with your advanced students. You will rather ask them to do more ippon kumite and jiyu ippon kumite to prepare for jiyu kumite. In addition, teach the students the side step and forward step techniques. Require them to do those techniques and discourage the straight back movement. On the other hand, if you are an advanced student (brown belts and particularly Shodan and Nidan), practice more jiyu ippon kumite and use those techniques to step forward rather than to step back when you are a defending side. So the key words are "step forward".



I hope my advice will help you in your kumite training. You will not know until you try. If you are not satisfied with what you are doing in kumite right now, you have nothing to lose to try



this out. You may find that your poor performance is not because of the lack of ability but in fact, it may be incorrect kumite practice routines. OK, I may be too optimistic with my statement; "you have nothing to lose". You may have your nose punched in or receive a kick in your mid-section as you try to step in. So, there is that risk in this approach, but I strongly recommend that you try it as it is worth the risk. I hope you will agree as it could mean a significant improvement of your kumite skills. Believe me, your counter attacks will be far more powerful and your opponents will find that your techniques are significantly harder to dodge or block. In addition, you will be able to understand the bunkai better and easier. As you become more familiar with these movements it will be easier for you to execute the bunkai techniques. I believe it is about time that we give credit to our kata that made karate a unique bujutsu (martial art).

So we learned why we have this big disparity between kata and kumite. If you wish to make your kumite as a potent martial arts skill, I urge the advanced students to minimize the Gohon and Sanbon kumite, and increase the forward moving techniques in ippon and jiyu ippon kumite. I am happy if this article helps the individual practitioners but I wrote it mainly for the instructors. To reduce the disparity that firmly exists in our current training; shouldn't the correction be initiated and implemented by the instructors? I urge the instructors to examine their teaching syllabus not only in the kumite portion but also kihon and kata so that there will be consistency in the entire training. The main message which I wish to leave with the readers is "Retreating or stepping back is an option but the worst one" so do not retreat in kumite. You must always think of "advancing forward" as you do in kata.

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## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **第六章**

## **WHY UCHI UKE?**

### **内受けの謎**

Have you noticed that there are no outside blocks in all 5 Heian kata except for two techniques? One soto uke is found in Sandan and another in Godan. All the other blocks in Heian kata are inside blocks such as gedan barai, uchi ude uke, age uke and shuto uke. Does it matter or should we care about this? I think we should. When I noticed it I found it to be very puzzling. It was puzzling to me because I knew the outside blocks in general are much easier blocks to execute than the inside ones. For instance, chudan soto uke, an outside forearm block is very popular in kihon practice as well as in kihon kumite (i.e. sanbon kumite, ippon kumite, etc.) but strangely they are not found in our basic kata, Heian. So, I wondered for a long time but could not ask my Sensei or Senpai as this subject seemed to be too trivial. I finally found the answer on my own when I became more senior and began to understand the budo karate. Let us look into this and let me share what I discovered.

### **Uchi uke 内受け (Inside blocks)**



First let's look at the definition of inside block. It is a blocking method having the blocking arm pulled in towards inside of the body before it travels towards outside. On the other hand, in an outside block the blocking arm is initially brought outside of the body before it travels inward to block. We will cover the outside blocks later but here we will discuss inside blocks first.

Let's review all the uke waza in Heian kata. In Shodan, we see gedan barai (下段払い), jodan age uke (上段上げ受け) and shuto uke (手刀受け) that are all uchi uke. In Nidan we have age uke or jodan ude uke (上段腕受け), shuto uke, chudan osae uke (中段押え受け), chudan uchi ude uke (中段内腕受け), gedan barai and the last move is jodan age-uke. These blocks are also all uchi uke. Some interpret the second move as a hasami uke using both arms. Any technique that works is acceptable for bunkai but I doubt very much Itosu introduced such a unique technique in the first kata (Heian Nidan was Pin-an Shodan). I have seen such an application in a Hong Kong kung fu movie but it surely looked artificial and not practical. In Sandan, the uke waza are chudan uchi ude uke, morote kosa uke (諸手交叉受け), chudan ude uke, chudan osae uke, soto enpi uke (外猿臂受け), and chudan tsukami uke (中段掴み受け). As I mentioned earlier Sandan has one outside block, soto enpi uke but all the other blocks are inside blocks. How about Yondan, more complex kata? They are jodan shuto uke (上段手刀受け), gedan kosa uke (下段交叉受け), chudan uchi ude uke, shuto gedan barai, jodan shuto age uke, morote uchi kakiwake (諸手内掻き分け) and chudan shuto uke.



Again they are all inside blocks and no outside blocks are used. Is this the same with Godan? Let's check. The blocks in this kata are chudan uchi ude uke, gedan kosa uke (下段交叉受け), jodan shuto kosa uke, gedan barai, chudan haishu uke (中段背手受け), jodan kaishu nagashi uke (上段開手流し受け) and manji uke (卍受け). Jodan kaishu nagashi uke is an outside block and it is done twice. But that is the only exception and all other blocks are inside blocks. We confirmed only two blocks are outside blocks in all Heian kata. Let's look at our kihon kumite and see what kind of block we use. In our kihon kumite of sanbon and ippon kumite, we frequently see soto ude uke in both jodan and chudan levels. Those blocks are not only allowed but often you are instructed to use them despite the fact that we do not see them in Heian kata.



This is where I thought it to be mysterious and puzzling; at least it was to me. Let's look back to the time when Itosu created Heian kata, late 19th century. Did you know that the training syllabus then was strictly kata only? The instructors might have shown the bunkai to the very senior students but there was no kihon kumite training in Okinawa karate at that time. For that matter there was no kihon training of doing one technique repeatedly up and down the dojo. In fact, kihon training and kihon kumite were added after Funakoshi came to Japan. The exact time and how they were introduced are not known or documented but it is a documented fact that many university students showed great dissatisfaction with kata only training of Funakoshi in the 1920's. Some of them visited Okinawa to examine how karate was taught where it came from. Some including Otsuka (a student of Funakoshi and later founded Wado ryu) visited other karate instructors who had moved to Japan from Okinawa such as Motobu (moved to Osaka in 1921) and Mabuni (also to Osaka in 1929) to learn more about the training syllabus. As I mentioned earlier Otsuka departed from Funakoshi around 1930 after only a few years of training under him. My understanding is that the university students and Otsuka requested a training syllabus of kumite which forced Funakoshi to add the regimented training method of kihon kumite such as gohon kumite, sanbon kumite, etc.

It is known that a strong influence came from Kendo (Japanese fencing) training. Okinawa masters never believed in retreating backward that are found in kihon kumite particularly of sanbon and gohon kumite. This is why you never see any multiple step back moves in our kata. The moves are in general either straight forward or to the sides. If this is the case in our kata, we must ask why our kihon kumite is always stepping back for the defenders. Just watch the kihon training of Kendo and you see the kendo practitioners move very linear or straight forward and back. The adoption of this training caused the big disparity between kata and kihon kumite. I discussed this subject in the previous chapter so I will not repeat this here.



After practicing kihon kumite so much and becoming comfortable with stepping back and using mainly soto uke, many students began to believe kata techniques and kata as a whole did not work. Some of them dropped kata totally from their training syllabus. Kata was created by the masters of the past who actually developed those kata from actual fighting experiences. Well, at least we were told so. So we must ask "Does kata work in a real fighting situation?" My short answer is "Yes". My longer answer is "Yes but you need to know the bunkai". Most of the bunkai techniques cannot be practiced in the linear movements of 3 or 5 steps of the same techniques as we do in kihon kumite. Bunkai, applications are much more complex in their foot work, tai sabaki, etc. If so, then do we need kihon kumite? Yes, I believe we do. I have written a separate chapter on this particular subject so I will not cover this in depth at this time. One major benefit I can say about kihon kumite is ma-ai (distance) and a simple fact of facing an opponent. These two things are very hard to learn from practicing only kata.

Let us go back to what we were discussing; uke and Heian kata. Itosu, the creator of Heian obviously believed uchi uke is more important and necessary than soto uke Chudan uchi ude uke and chudan shuto uke are difficult to use especially when you retreat straight back. All you have to do is to try these techniques in sanbon kumite and you will see. These difficult blocks; shuto uke and uchi ude uke finally work well once you start to body shift in angles in your kumite. So we realize now that some of uchi uke works better when we move in angles. But

you will ask why the outside blocks are ignored or unused in kata. As I studied further into bunkai I came up with two good reasons. A hint is that Okinawa masters were the hard core martial artists. The first reason is that they despised the techniques that would expose their vital points of the body. This was the very reason why they did not include mawashi geri and yoko ke-age when they created the kata. Those kicks obviously would expose the groin area which must be completely avoided. The other vital areas are the solar plexus in chudan level and eyes, temples, throat, etc. in jodan level. If you understand this concept then it is easy to see that the masters believed it was almost a suicidal move to swing an arm way outside of the body line to prepare for a block. We were taught in our training some 50 years ago always to "hide" the vital points that are mostly lined through the center or chushinsen or seichusen, an imaginary line between the top of the head and the tail bone. If you examine the two outside blocks closer; enpi uke and jodan nagashi uke, you will realize that neither block requires an arm to be swung outwardly. By the way, this enpi uke seen in Heian Sandan is an interesting to say the least. You would ask if the masters disliked to show the chushinsen to the opponents, then why this stance (with the fists placed on the hips looking like Superman) that exposes their front so much? There is a not well known Okinawan customs behind this technique. The clothes of Okinawa bushi (samurai) had the openings near the hips (almost like the pockets) and they customarily kept their hands in them even when they walked just as you would walk with your hands in your pockets. Therefore, standing in that position was very normal to the Okinawa masters.

### **Soto uke 外受け (Outside blocks)**

In Heian there are only two outside blocks which I have mentioned earlier.

#### **Soto Enpi Uke (外猿臂受け) in Sandan**



I have already covered on this unique block in another chapter so I will not go deeply into this. This block is used not only in Heian Sandan but also in Gankaku. From the mechanical perspective it is an outside block but the blocking arm is not pulled out. In fact the arm is stable as the fists are attached to the hips. In Heian Sandan, naturally, kiba dachi is used and this is a very reasonable tactic as you need to minimize the exposed front side of your body. We also see this block in Gankaku and the difference is it is done from a shizentai with quick hip rotations. But the basic idea is the same as in Sandan. I have covered the interesting part of this block in another chapter, Mysteries of Heian kata, so I will not repeat this. If you are interested in this subject please read that chapter.

#### **Jodan teisho nagashi uke (上段底掌流し受け) in Godan**



This is a very popular technique that is found not only in Heian Godan but also in Bassai and Kanku. The upper arm is a jodan nagashi uke as the lower arm with shuto is a gedan attack. As you practice these kata you notice that the very previous move before jodan nagashi uke is typically gedan barai. In other words that arm is kept low and not outward to expose the front side of the body. Though the arm does travel from outward to inward the move is almost from the front of the body towards the back passing the head. This move is definitely quite different from a typical chudan ude soto uke. The outward to inward move is very subtle and the exposure of the body is minimal. I am sure you can understand why the kata creators included

this technique. Now let us look at the other outside blocks we learn in kihon and kumite.

### **Chudan soto ude uke (中段外腕受け)**

Probably the most popular blocking technique against a chudan oizuki in Gohon or Sanbon kumite is this block. As the opponent steps in with a chudan oi zuki, the defender would bring the blocking arm wide and high over the shoulder like a bird would spread its wing. Then he will bring that arm in a semi-circular motion almost in a horizontal course and block a punch with the forearm.



Though this is the most popular block we do not find this block in Heian kata. We see this block for the first time in Bassai dai. Why is this? There must be a reason. What is wrong with this block? Well nothing is “wrong” with this block but there are two facts that the Okinawa masters did not like. One is the fact this block takes more time than uchi uke because of the longer course the blocking arm must take to execute, in other words, it must be pulled back before it goes forward to block. Secondly and more importantly, by bringing the block side arm out you will expose your mid-section though you will try to cover with the other arm. From the martial artist perspective this is something you want to avoid. In fact, those soto ude uke in Bassai dai are really not blocks. If you study bunkai for those moves you realize they are throwing moves. In the kata those moves are named soto ude uke and they are performed as if they were blocks. What makes me laugh is that some people really believe one popular interpretation of those ude uke combinations. In this interpretation it is explained that two ude uke in a succession are to switch the blocking hand to gain a favorable position. It does not take an intelligent or a high dan rank to realize this is an unrealistic and frankly ridiculous move. Just think. If you are the attacker and after giving an oi zuki, would you be standing still with your arm extended after your oi zuki is blocked for a period long enough for your opponent to switch his arms? If you are that slow maybe you should give up practicing karate. It really makes sense if you introduce a concept of throwing for those moves. Try this bunkai idea and see if it makes sense to the readers.

### **Jodan soto ude uke (上段外腕受け)**



We find this block only in Unsu and Jutte (Jitte). In Unsu, this block is done very quickly standing on one leg after mae geri with a fast body rotation then followed by chudan gyaku zuki. This kata is considered to be one of the highest skill level kata in Shotokan. I find it interesting to find jodan soto ude uke in Unsu. Another one is more interesting. You find jodan soto uke in Jutte and there you raise both arms up over your shoulders and the arms make a U shape above your head. You will keep this shape as you execute the outside forearm block. As you move from one kiba dachi to another, you swing both arms in a rotational manner. We find it a strange move until you learn that this kata was based on fighting against or with a bo, a staff. This swinging move with both hands above your head is no longer unnatural nor strange once you can imagine that you are holding a staff above your head. Therefore, we must say this is not a jodan ude uke in Jutte. We must conclude this block, jodan soto ude uke, is found only in Unsu. Let's look at the other JKA kata and see what other outside blocks we can find.

### **Jodan teisho uke (上段底掌受け) in Gankaku**



This technique calls for much debate when it comes to bunkai. This combination is performed as a double hand block; haishu uke with left hand and teisho uke with right hand. So it can be a combination block of uchi uke and soto uke. However, I believe this technique used to be a kosa uke just like the one found in Heian Godan. The following move is a tsukami uke with a rotation of the wrists and then nihon zuki exactly the way it is done in Heian Godan. I suspect Itosu took these moves from Gankaku when he created Heian Godan. Never the less this does not matter regarding the discussion we are having here. It is ok even if the right hand is soto teisho uke as this pressing block is done quickly and the right arm is not brought out widely out of the body line like we see in soto ude uke.

#### **Gedan soto ude uke (下段外腕受け) in Tekki Nidan**



This is the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> move in Tekki nidan and only place where we find this outside block in all kata. This move could be a soto ude uke against mae geri or chudan zuki but at the same time this movement can be interpreted as a break away technique from someone grabbing the wrist. An interpretation of the other hand being open and supporting the elbow of soto uke arm is an interesting one but we will not go into this here. I will write a separate chapter on Tekki Nidan and Sandan.

#### **Chudan teisho uke (中段底掌受け) in Jion, Jutte and Chinte**



This is done with kiba dachi in Jutte and Jion. So it is very natural and makes sense as you can keep the narrowest body space to the opponent with this stance. Your blocking hand will be held at your hip till the last moment and delivered very quickly without bringing the forearm much to the outside of the body line. In Chinte it is done in sochin dachi and the technique is done with the right hand and left hand in succession meaning the first one as a block to a chudan zuki and followed by the second one to strike the elbow.





In Hangetsu morote teisho uke is used at the very end of this kata. Yes, it is possible to use this technique against mae geri as shown in the photo here but it is not a realistic application as you are totally exposing your face to the kicker. That kicker will punch jodan as soon as his kick is blocked like this. I believe I have already mentioned this in my previous book under “Hangetsu” that Funakoshi changed the original technique of morote mawashi uke to the current technique. For what reason or benefit my research has not discovered the answer yet. All I can say is that this is a strange technique to end a kata with as kata do not end with a block despite the opinion that it is commonly believed so.

Note that there are many other kinds of uke other than soto uke and uchi uke. Some are upward (keito uke 鷄頭受け), downward (osae or otoshi uke 落とし受け), circle (kaiten uke 回転受け) or rotating (mawashi uke 回し受け) and some are even going forward (tome waza 止め技) or toward yourself (nagashi uke).

### **Conclusion:**

As we reviewed both uchi uke and soto uke, we realized that the kata creators obviously wanted to keep the arms inward and did not include any blocks that would bring the arms way outside of the body line. From the martial art perspective this is only natural and there is nothing to debate. At the end I want to add one more important fact about the karate technique that may not be very obvious. Most of the karate techniques consisted of the expansion of the muscles. This is a big contrast to the techniques of judo that are mainly of contraction or pull-in. On the other hand, you can easily see that the karate strikes and kicks are mainly expansion or stretching your muscles. Of course there are some contraction techniques such as ushiro enpi uchi, kagi zuki and ura mawashi geri but they are minority techniques. We tend to forget this as we introduced a concept of kime particularly in our punching techniques. I have already written a chapter on the harmful side of kime in my previous book so I will not repeat it here. However, I must end this chapter with a remark that modern Shotokan has forgotten the concept of ki flow associated with a delivery of a technique. Too much kime stops or prevents ki flow or energy flow thus making the technique ineffective and the performer stiff and rigid.

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## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **第七章**

## **DOES SHOTO KAN LACK CIRCULAR TECHNIQUES?**

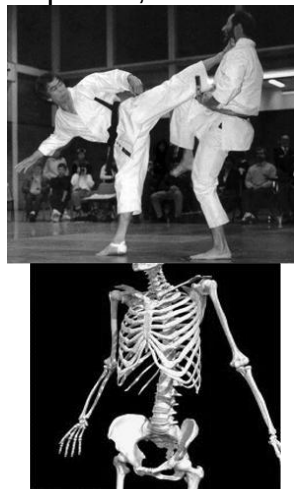
**松涛館と直線技の謎**

I often hear the comment that Shotokan karate lacks circular movements or techniques. Some claim that other styles such as Goju ryu and Uechi ryu have more of those circular techniques. I hear this not only from the non-Shotokan karate practitioners but also from the instructors of Shotokan itself. If the instructors feel that way then it must be true. Or is it? Before believing this idea we must do some investigation.



The most popular attacking technique in Shotokan is “choku zuki or “straight punch”. It is very true that a choku zuki punch travels very straight as shown in the picture on the left. Your teacher tells you to keep the elbow in and down so that your punch will not make an arc. So, you might say, “Oi-zuki and gyaku-zuki are very popular in Shotokan so our attacking techniques look straight.” You are absolutely correct on one thing. That is the word “look”. The line of movement of a fist is indeed straight. We will discuss this point further later.

The above mentioned mechanism also applies to Yokogeri kekomi. In this kick the kicking foot, after being tucked up near the opposite knee will indeed travel (at least it’s supposed to) straight to the target. Beside these “straight” techniques, our kata’s enbusen is very linear, a combination of straight lines crossed by either 90 degree or 45 degree angles. In addition to kata, our kumite syllabus such as gohon kumite and sanbon kumite engrains in our brain that our moves must be very straight and linear. Considering those, no wonder our karate looks linear. We will discuss further these two points; kata and kumite, later in the article.



Let us get back to the discussion of karate techniques. Here, we must look deeper into the physical mechanism of our body. What goes on behind the scene is a combination of the shoulder socket turning as the upper arm makes in a circular movement forward as the punch is delivered. So the elbow makes a pendulum swing as you extend your punching arm and that is a circular movement. This is the basic concept of the physiological mechanism of our body. We are all aware that our body is constructed from many sticks (bones) and the joints (knees, elbows, etc) to connect them. This means all the complex body movements we make in our daily lives such as walking, shaking hands and eating are made up of both straight and circular movements of those sticks. Of course, some of the movements are more complex and sophisticated but in general those two motions are the basis of our body movements. If this is the case with our normal daily activities, then it is easily guessed that all the karate techniques require some kind of circular movement.

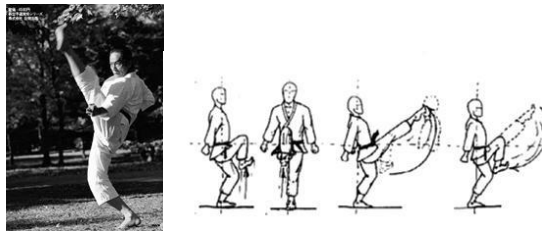
You can review all the “straight” techniques from every punching, kicking and blocking technique and you will see that those techniques require some combination of circular movement. In other words, these techniques use the circular movements of our arms (including

the shoulders) and legs (including the hips). In addition, there are some circular movements using hip rotation (like in gyaku zuki). And this is true not only for Shotokan karate but covers a much broader spectrum including not only all karate styles and martial arts but all athletic and physical activities.

Believe it or not, we already have many techniques in Shotokan that are very circular. An excellent example we all know is Shuto uchi or knife hand strike. Let's take a closer look. The photo here surely shows a circular movement of this technique. We find this technique done once in Heian Yondan and many times in Kanku Dai, so it is a very familiar technique to us. The diagram of shuto uchi shows an inward swing but this technique can be applied also with an outward swing. In fact, we practice this technique called shuto uke, a knife hand block very frequently. Even though the outward movement does not travel with a larger circular course, it is a circular technique. And, we start practicing this technique as early as our first kata, Heian Shodan. Let's look at the kicking techniques next.

The most popular kick in Shotokan is mae geri, front kick.

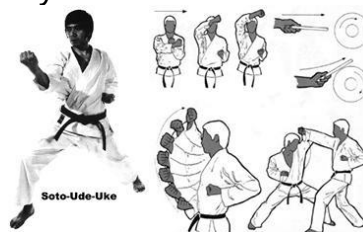
Many people believe it is a straight kick because in maegeri kekomi the foot does move straight forward (Pic 1).



Pic 1 Pic 2

But if you look at the mechanism of this kick closer it is definitely a circular kick and not a linear move technique (Pic 2). When you think of a circular kick you will quickly remember mawashi geri, round house kick. We all agree its movement is very circular. I am sure you were taught to bring up the kicking knee to the hip height and then deliver a kick in a very circular and horizontal way. Not only the kicking leg but you were told to rotate the entire hip area along with the kicking leg. We can also say other kicks like yoko ke-age and mikazuki geri are also the kicks that must be considered circular techniques.

Earlier we discussed that shuto uke is a circular move. How about other blocks? Let's look at two very popular blocks; chudan soto ude uke (Pic 3) and age uke (Pic 4). See the diagrams below. Those two blocks are definitely circular in their movements.



Pic 3 Pic 4

As a matter of fact, if you examine the motions of the other blocks like chudan uchi uke and gedan barai, you will find that they also move in a circular way though they may not be as obvious as soto uke. We have looked at quite a few popular techniques and you must admit that all our techniques employ circular movements. Well, you will say "OK I agree that these techniques are supposed to be circular. But our moves do not look circular." Well, I think you hit the bull's eye. That "impression" may well be the exact reason why many of you feel that Shotokan karate lacks circular movements. Now, it looks like we are back to square one.

Here, I challenge you by asking this key question, "Why must our technique be or look circular?" You must believe a circular movement is better than a straight one. At least, you put much value in circular techniques, then we must know why. Let us examine the circular techniques and see if there are any significant merits to support your beliefs.

Three popular advantages of circular movements;

1. An easier transition from one technique to another as the completion of one technique would blend into the one that follows. In other words, a series of movements can be made without stopping between the movements.

2. A whip like motion (uraken uchi, shuto uchi, mawashi geri, etc.) could generate a lot of speed and a great impact as it hits a target.
3. Circular movements look smoother than straight ones. Our techniques give an impression of digital or jerky motions.

Next let's review those advantages.

1. Easier Transitions: This is probably the biggest reason why we believe a circular motion is better than a linear one. In a circular motion, one technique can lead into another technique without stopping or slowing down. A good example may be a combination of shuto jodan age uke and a jodan shuto soto mawashi uchi using the same arm. This shows that one movement or an action could contain two, three or more techniques. This is extremely difficult to get from a linear technique. It can be done with two techniques packed in one motion (for instance a yamazuki which may be a jodan uke and simultaneous jodan zuki) but having 3 or 4 is almost impossible.
2. Whipping Motion Produces Speed and Power: It is true that a whip like motion could create tremendous speed at the end of its motion as a real whip can prove the point. However, from a scientific point of view, a circular motion takes more time to arrive at its target than a straight one (provided those actions move at the same speed). No one would argue that the distance of a circular movement is longer than that of a straight line. So a quick straight punch to a target will reach the target sooner than a large round shuto or back fist (again the speed of those techniques are supposed to be the same). So, a circular movement is not necessarily a better solution when you are talking about a quick technique. One thing I must add is the need for distance and angle from which a technique is delivered. In close, (grappling distance), circular techniques, (i.e. mawashi uchi and mawashi geri), are very effective as they are not visible and it is easier to make a large impact. In such close distance even though it is possible, it is extremely difficult to make such impact with choku zuki and mae geri.
3. Circular Motions Are Smooth: Circular motions may look smoother than linear movements. A smooth motion is definitely better or more effective than a jerky one. But are all linear motions jerky? You might say "Not necessarily". But it is true that a linear motion inherently has that tendency. Why so? Let's look at a piston motion. We know that this movement can easily become jerky because it must stop its motion every time it gets to the end of a movement and is pulled back before it can repeat its motion. For this reason a linear movement inherently has a tendency to become jerky and it needs further explanation. In fact, I am sure you agree that it is not too difficult to come to a complete stop with a movement such as a choku zuki. You might ask, "Well then, why do you say a piston's motion can easily become jerky?" To be able to answer this you must understand the mechanism of relaxation and tension. I know you are familiar with these terms and you believe you manage and control them while you practice your karate. But I ask "Can you really?" Believe it or not, achieving complete relaxation is a technique that requires an extremely high level of body mechanism control. Most practitioners are trying to relax their muscles totally but in fact they are more tensed than relaxed. I am sure you have seen an inexperienced driver on the road who keeps one foot on the brake pedal while he is pressing on the accelerator pedal with the other foot. So, this driver is always putting some brake action to his car thus it is not running at the speed it would without drag. He will also need more time to stop his car as he is pressing on the accelerator while he is trying to stop the car by pressing on the brake. A similar situation often happens with your muscles during your punches. At the end of a choku zuki, the stopping action of your fist will not be instantaneous but sort of dragging and the next motion will be, yes, jerky. You rarely see a renzuki of more than 5 or 6 punches in our kumite match but in a boxing match we often see the combination of 6 straight punches or more in one "action" or an exchange. If you remember the great boxers like Ali and Leonard, I am sure you can recall their renzuki that was smooth and fast. They never gave an impression of jerkiness, did

they?

Now we need to look at some of the hind side of circular techniques. Yes, we must understand the disadvantages and the unattractive side of circular techniques to fully appreciate our karate techniques.

a. I have already mentioned this before but this is scientifically a fact that a distance between a set of two points, a straight line is the shortest. We all know this. This means any type of circular route that ties those two points is longer in distance than a straight one. If the speeds are identical, a circular movement will take a longer time to reach a target than a straight movement. According to this theory, a choku zuki to the opponents' head will reach the target sooner than a mawashi zuki.



b. Another fact is that most of the circular techniques are structurally more visible. A good example may be a uraken uchi is more visible than a choku zuki. The larger the circular movement is, naturally the more visible. Though a mae geri and a mawashi geri both use circular movements, the mawashi geri is definitely more visible as it has a larger circular motion including the hip region. On the other hand, a mae geri has a smaller circular action with the fore leg beneath the knee thus it is much less noticeable. This is the major reason why a mae geri is found in many kata but Okinawan masters did not incorporate a mawashi geri in any kata (Unsu may be an exception but it can be argued. I wrote another article on Mikazuki geri vs. Mawashi geri. This unique kick in Unsu is explained in detail.). A similar tendency is observed in modern day tournaments. A mae geri is less visible and possibly faster which means easier to score, therefore, a mae geri is the most popular kicking technique used to score a point. From a martial arts perspective this issue (visibility and invisibility) is a very serious matter. In a life and a death situation, you want your technique to be as unnoticeable or stealthy as possible.

So now how would you answer if I were to ask you the question, "Are the circular movements better than the linear ones?" Well I hope you will answer, "Not necessarily." This is why we need to learn and use both types of techniques. As we all know it is more advantageous to have different types of weapons in a real battle. In hand to hand combat the concept is still the same. The straight and linear techniques have unique advantages, as well as the circular techniques have their own advantages. In Shotokan karate we indeed have both kinds of techniques. Then, why do some of us feel our karate is linear and jerky? Well that is the big question and we must find the answer to that.

We must know the reasons and causes before we can fix these "problems". I wish to present several facts that are causing them. Let me present two causes for the "jerky problem" and one big fact for the "linear look". First, let's look at the causes for our jerky or digital movements. One cause is kime and another is tournament kumite.



If you are a hardcore Shotokan practitioner, you might burst out saying, "What's wrong with kime? You need a kime to knock down an opponent. How could it be a major cause?" I have written an article focused on the effect of wrong kime in the past. I will not go deep into the explanation of this at this time so I'll get right to the point. We are tensed too much and we're making kime too long. We were not taught how to relax and to make a proper kime. So, we look like a car with an over careful driver who puts his feet on both the accelerator and brake. We just need to let our foot off the brake but, it is easier said than done. To learn how to relax is much more difficult, believe it or not, than to tense. Kanazawa took up Tai Chi to supplement his training so he could be more relaxed. Late Asai took Chi gong (ki training) to train his body to be more relaxed. It is unfortunately true that out of box Shotokan karate training does not teach you sufficiently how to relax and it pays too much attention to "kime" or tension. As a result, our movements tend to look jerky.

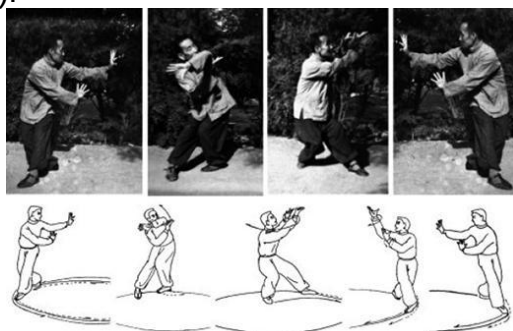
Now we need to see what are involved in tournament kumite to see why this adds to the jerky motions. As we all know, in a sundome (non-contact) tournament, a point is given by a referee. His job is to watch the techniques of the competitors and give a point if he determines that an attacking technique was effective. If a competitor throws a good technique but hits his opponent and knocks him down, then he gets a warning or even loses the match, even though the technique was indeed effective. The competitors need to pull back or stop the technique to get a point. Pulling back became so important that I heard some practitioners practice more on fast hikite (draw hand) than on how to throw a strong punch. Stopping a technique is inherently not the character of a circular technique thus it is rare to see a shuto uchi or a uraken uchi in a tournament. The circular techniques are very effective in a close fighting situation for two reasons. The techniques angle is most effective if a punch or a kick lands at a right (90 degree) angle and a circular technique works best in a short distance for that particular reason. The other reason is its invisibility in a short distance. We pointed out that a circular technique is more visible than a linear technique in general. However, in a close distance situation a movement coming from the side gets out of the line of vision thus less visible. However, when the opponents get into so called grabbling distance, a referee quickly stops the fight and forces the opponents to step back. In addition, a round technique like a mawashi uchi or kagi zuki in such a distance will most likely not be recognized as a scoring technique by the judges. I have experienced this in my own tournament days. The judges gave me a waza ari to my choku zuki and gyaku zuki but when I delivered a mawashi zuki, though very strong and fast, I never could gain a point for that technique.



A similar situation is found in tournament competition of kata. As you must show your movements you need to stop and hold a position for a long time (although it may be a few seconds, I consider it too long) at several kime positions. If you run through the movements like a series of combinations, your kata will not score high. However, a true kata performance should be done in one stroke, so to speak and there should not be any real stops in the middle. It is like a brush writing of a kanji sentence. From one kanji to another, the brush must have a connection even though the stroke is not visible (sometimes you may see a line of small drops of ink from the ending point of one kanji to the beginning of the next one that shows the connection is indeed there)

As long as a practitioner participates in a tournament this trend cannot be avoided. So what can we do? Well it all depends on what your purpose is. If you want to win a tournament then you have to use whatever techniques you need to win. But if you wish to excel as a martial artist then you need to go beyond the tournament techniques and practice all the techniques that would work in a real fight. A definition of “real fight” needs to be defined and further discussed but I will not do so here in this article due to the lack of space. I'll just state that it is a fight without any rules and bars.

Now let's summarize the facts of Shotokan karate that makes our performance look linear. Those facts are our kata and kumite training. Let's take a look at our kata. As you remember we are talking about the enbusen being linear. Tekki kata with a long Kiba dachi stance and moving only sideways makes you look extremely linear. By the way, it is a mysterious kata in itself (read my book, Shotokan Myths. I put two chapters on this kata). The other kata have the turns (most of them are either 90 or 180 degrees) and some kata have angle movements but the lines are still very straight. As we know in shotokan kata we have no circular enbusen which we find in Ba Gua (a style of kung fu) whose enbusen is a combination of circular foot work and steps (photo below).



For an interested reader, here is an excellent Ba Gua kata, 64 Palms. Watch the beautiful and smooth performance by an old master here:

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8G2bEzsgHs\\_and\\_playnext=1\\_and\\_list=PL3887127982F54E4B\\_and\\_index=73](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8G2bEzsgHs_and_playnext=1_and_list=PL3887127982F54E4B_and_index=73)

As you watch this kata you will quickly notice the performer simply walks in circles, multiple and complex circles. In Shotokan we do not have any kata like this one. Asai sensei recognized this and I heard that he created a kata called En-no kata 円の形 (Circle kata) but no record of this kata is known. He also created Tekki Mugen, a modified Tekki that can be performed in a circle (or for that matter almost any other shape) enbusen. Just imagine this truly linear kata, Tekki can be done in a circle, a square, a double loop, etc. I must tell you, it is indeed fun to do Tekki Mugen in different shaped enbusen. WJKA is publishing an Asai kata textbook series, Kata Kyohon 形教本 (Kata Textbook) and we have published up to volume 3 as of December 2012. I am the co-author and we will include Tekki Mugen 鉄騎無限 (Tekki Infinite) in one of the future volumes. He also taught me how to do all Heian kata in a circle; a very creative and interesting kata modification.

For those who are interested in Shotokan karate that applies more circular techniques, I suggest you look at Asai style Shotokan karate. In Asai ryu Shotokan you need to pay more attention to relaxing before thinking of a kime. In WJKA, we practice more than 30 Asai kata that supplement the standard JKA kata. If you are interested you can easily find the Asai kata such as Suishu, Kashu, Kakuyoku and Meikyo Nidan on YouTube as well as Kata Kyohon textbooks. As you can see, these kata are based on many circular movements. I am sure you will agree that all the techniques you see here flow very nicely and you see no jerky motions.

The second issue is our kumite syllabus particularly sanbon kumite and gohon kumite. In those exercises the defenders are taught to step back while the opponents are stepping forward as they attack. It's engrained in our head that we naturally step back when we engage with an attacking technique. Is this bad? No, it isn't only if you are 8 kyu or 7 kyu. The beginners are not ready to learn the more advanced and more appropriate steps (i.e. shifting to the sides, switching feet or stepping in), so sanbon kumite and gohon kumite are very good introduction exercises for them. However, the problem is these exercises are continually used for the intermediate and advanced students. This is because they are “fun” and less challenging than ippon kumite (if done correctly). So, in many of the dojo we witness sanbon

kumite and gohon kumite are being used for kumite training even for the intermediate and advanced. This article is not on or about kumite so I will not expand the idea here on how kumite should be trained. I will just point out the fact that frequent sanbon kumite and gohon kumite exercise adds the impression that our training looks linear. We all know that in jiyu kumite and a street fight, complex and irregular shifting patterns emerge. I am not proposing sanbon and gohon kumite to be eliminated or banned. I am proposing that more ippon and jiyu ippon kumite be practiced by the intermediate and advanced with much emphasis on not shifting straight back. The students must be told that stepping straight back is the worst option to take in a fight (this will be explained in details in another chapter: "Disparity between kata and kumite").

### **Conclusion :**

So, as a conclusion let me ask the original question; "Do we have to introduce more circular techniques to Shotokan?" Hopefully your answer is "No". By now you also know what we need to do. You will agree that we simply need to use more of those circular techniques we already have. In addition, we need to learn to relax more so that we can make our linear movements smoother and more flowing. If you look at the techniques of our kata closely provided it is done correctly, you will recognize and appreciate that many of the techniques we find are very circular and beautiful. If you claim you are practicing Budo karate then you need to be able to apply those techniques to your kumite. Once this is mastered, you will have a harmonious combination of linear and circular techniques that are surprisingly effective in real fighting.

押忍



# **CHAPTER EIGHT**

## **第八章**

### **STRAIGHT TECHNIQUES**

### **WITHIN CIRCULAR MOVEMENTS**

#### **円運動による直線技の謎**

I know you are confused with the title of this chapter. I do not blame you if you are confused as it does not make sense to have a straight technique in anything circular. Straight and circular do not match or accommodate or at least they seem so. Let me explain. I wrote a chapter, "Shotokan Lacks Circular Techniques". Its conclusion was that we need to use more of those circular techniques we already have. I also pointed out that we need to learn to relax more so that we can make our linear movements smoother and more flowing. In that chapter I omitted an important factor; how to merge circular movements into a linear technique. I would like to attempt to describe this unusual concept in this chapter.

I have mentioned that many Shotokan practitioners look stiff and gauche. Their linear and square moves come from the excessive tension that results in unnatural movements. This is sadly true. But if you observe the real experts of Shotokan instructors like Asai, Yahara, Osaka and Kanazawa that is not the case. Their performances show no stiffness or excessive tension even in their linear techniques. Does it come only from relaxing more? Proper relaxation is definitely a key but there are a couple of other important factors they use that we must know. I am happy to share those ideas with the readers but first let us review the circular techniques we have in Shotokan. I listed many circular techniques with the illustrations in the other chapter. Let us review those circular techniques first.

### **Kicking techniques 蹴り技**



Mawashi geri is a great sample of a kick that requires circular movement of the kicking leg. So is the yoko ke-age. Even a straight looking maegeri is delivered with a pendulum swing of the leg between the knee and the foot.

### **Blocking techniques 受け技**

This concept is also very visible in the blocking techniques. The obvious one is soto ude uke in which the blocking arm is swung very widely in a circular movement as we block. Even a less obvious blocking technique like age uke and gedan barai the circular movement of a blocking arm is used.

### **Attacking techniques 攻撃技**



How about the attacking techniques with our arms? The very obvious technique is shuto uchi in which the open hand is used in a very circular manner. Another good example is uraken uchi. The fist is delivered with a very circular movement of the delivery arm.

OK I am sure the readers agreed that these techniques are performed with vivid circular movements. I want to bring out a not so well known fact that the circular techniques were discouraged or disliked by the ancient masters in Okinawa. If you are a budo karate-ka you can figure out why that was the case. There are some downside to the circular techniques. The biggest short coming to a martial artist is that those techniques are very visible to the opponents because of the circular courses they take. This is a big no-no if you are fighting for your life. The second is a simple mathematical fact that a circular course is longer than a straight one which means it usually takes longer time to get to the end point. This assumption is based on a condition that the speed of the techniques is the same. If the speed of a circular technique is faster than that of a straight course then it could take the same or shorter time to reach the goal or a target. However, this does not happen normally so we can say a straight technique such as a choku zuki is faster than a circular technique of shuto uchi and uraken uchi. At the same time, this fact may not mean much in a free for all fight as other factors are as or more important than the simple speed of a technique. The other important factors are distance, timing, rhythm, accuracy, power, appropriateness of the techniques, etc. etc. Despite

the short comings of the circular techniques those masters used them. How did they do this? You may be surprised to hear a simple answer but they simply minimized the circularness in their techniques. Really? Yes they did this to minimize the visibility and longer distance. This is done not only in strikes but also in kicks and blocks. Let's take one example from each category.

Strike: I will pick shuto uchi which we find in Heian Yondan and Kanku dai. We are taught to bring the striking arm up behind your head and the elbow is expanded to the side before the circular rotation of the shuto.



Yes that is a textbook movement and that is how we should learn when we are a kyu student. To get the maximum speed by minimizing the distance, you will not bring your striking arm so high and you do not pull back. It is hard to describe this with words but the striking arm is shot almost straight up from the shizentai position (arms dangling in front of you). The striking hand is shot to the outside of the target area such as the neck or temple. When the hand reaches the maximum distance (hopefully right next to the target area) it is suddenly pulled back as you would do with a whip when you want to crack it. In the course of the hand returning back it makes a slight circular motion towards the target and and it strikes the target. That is the point when a whip makes a cracking sound. If it is done correctly it will be very invisible and also very fast.

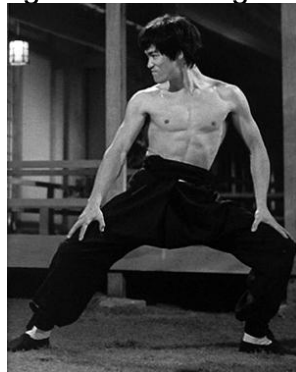


Block: How do you do soto ude uke? You bring your blocking arm up just as you do shuto uchi. In other words, you are taught to bring the blocking hand high and behind your head before you start the circular motion of ude uke. Then how do you do the straight like soto ude uke? Assume a natural stance as you do in an ippon kumite. As you step back or forward to do your block you will not bring your blocking arm high and back. Instead you bring your arm to the front as though you will touch the opponent's punching arm. When the opponent's punching fist is near your chudan or jodan target you quickly pull back your blocking arm by dropping the elbow down and rotating the wrist. You do not even need to move your arm sideways to block the punch as you will rotate your hips and upper body slightly which will give the necessary sideway motion to block the punch. This action is smooth and very fast. It is also less obvious of what you are trying to do to the opponent. You may say, "Hey isn't that cheating?" My answer is "no". Of course, this is not what you will teach the white belt or even a brown belt. But this is what you need to do in a jiyu kumite and a real fight.



Kick: Mawashi geri is such a popular example of a circular technique let's find out if it can be

done in a straight way. We are taught to bring our knee up 90 degrees or even higher to the side. First of all this requires a lot of balancing practice and I recommend that all of us should spend much time to train this exercise. This particular exercise is not really a flexibility exercise but rather to strengthen the side and back muscles that are necessary for not only for mawashi geri but also for yoko geri and ushiro geri. But bringing your knee this high is only for kihon training and particularly for the kyu students. When you get to be a dan student that is not how you will prepare for a mawashi geri in a kumite situation. How are we supposed to do it? You may be surprised or may not like what you find out. You will lift your knee forward as you will do mae geri. You bring the knee with the leg tightly tucked up towards the opponent straight forward and at the last moment you will quickly rotate your hips and throw the kicking foot in a small circular motion to the temple or jodan of the opponent. This kick is called Mikazuki geri in Kyokushinkai (full contact style). However, most of the Shotokan dojo do not teach this kick. In fact, the instructors will tell you to bring the knee up to the side. When I was competing in the 70's and 80's you could not get a score for this kick. As I am not very active in tournament judging lately the trend might have changed in the last twenty years or so.



We can talk about yoko ke-age but believe it or not, the concept of the delivery is the same as mawashi geri or mikazuki geri. In other words, you will execute yoko geri as though you will with mae geri, at least until the last moment. In kata, though many different stances are used, the kick itself is done mostly sideways (Heian Nidan and Yondan, Kanku, etc).

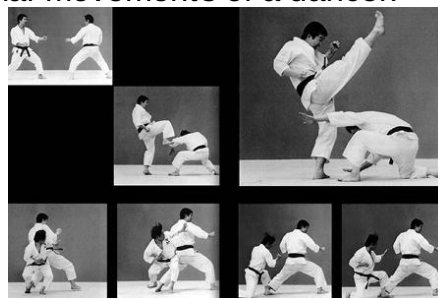
Only in Sochin is it done to the rear which is one of the challenging techniques in this kata. In Kihon training, you are probably taught to execute yoko geri from kiba dachi. Bruce Lee is a famous movie actor and it is amazing how popular he still is, even though he died 40 years ago (1940-1973). He definitely was a much better actor than a martial artist. I give him a lot of credit in making Asian martial arts popular through his kung fu movies. Anyway, he used yoko kekomi from Kibadachi in his movies so a lot of people tried to imitate this. It is very interesting that Bruce Lee favored this method as this move is so linear and straight while he was always preaching for a circular technique. Unlike his Wing Chun master, Ip Man, Lee adopted a wide kiba dachi in his movies. Ip Man used short natural stance for his short distance techniques of Wing Chun. I can understand why he used kiba dachi as it is more visual on the screen. So was the side stepping move with yoko geri kekomi that would hurl the opponent in the air showing the tremendous power his kick (supposedly) generated. This is why I say Lee was a very visual person and he knew exactly how he would appear on the screen. And that is exactly why he was so successful in his movies. The kung fu actions in the movies are so popular now so his moves in those movies are no longer unique but they were in the 70's and he brought about a revolution in the action movies. I used to see a Lee imitated fighting style in the 70's and 80's. In the current tournaments I witness a lot of hopping by the kumite competitors and this may be a left over from the Lee heritage. The debate of kibadachi and hopping, though interesting, is not the subject here so I will not go into this here but I will touch on this subject again in Chapter 10.

For the most effective yoko geri, both kekomi and ke-age, you need to assume either a full or half zenkutsu dachi and kick using the rear leg. To kick yoko geri to the front from zenkutsu dachi is challenging but it can be done smoothly if you raise your knee up just as you do mae geri. At the last moment you will quickly rotate your hips (much more than when you do it for mawashi geri) 90 degrees and execute yoko geri. There are a couple of important things that need to accompany this kick. One is to minimize the arm movements. This is the same for all kicks as the arms moving are the telltale sign to the opponents that you are kicking. You need

to separate your upper body movements from the lower body. In other words, the arms must not be used to generate the hip rotation. This concept may be totally opposite from what you were taught or learned. You will minimize the arm movements but to balance the hip rotation you will reverse rotate only the shoulders which means your upper body would be facing forward all the time. This is not a difficult concept but executing it is hard and needs intense training. Though the shoulders would be reverse rotated the hands must show minimum movements. They should be kept up high so that they can be used for jodan protection and a follow up punch. The second important thing is to have a quick reverse hip rotation after the kick bringing the hips facing forward and land in a full or half zenkutsu. It is easier to land with the hips sideways and land in kiba dachi. Though it is an option while you are learning how to kick yoko geri forward from zenkutsu dachi, you must avoid this in kumite. In kumite your feet and hips should be facing the opponent always except during the execution of some of the techniques. I wish I could explain this mechanism better but doing so with words is extremely difficult. If you do not understand these fine points I apologize for my poor ability with this explanation. It would be much easier for me to explain them in person using my body. I am a principal partner of KarateCoaching online instruction service ([www.karatecoaching.com](http://www.karatecoaching.com)) and I create many instructional videos there. The fee is very reasonable and the contents are educational to all levels of shotokan practitioners. I invite the readers to subscribe to this service.

OK so I described that the experts will make their circular techniques “smaller” so that they become closer to straight or linear techniques. I also explained two major reasons why they do this. Despite their effort to make all their techniques linear and straight they do not look stiff or rigid.

Of course they are more relaxed and their techniques look smooth, but there is one other major factor that makes their movements less linear and more flowing. It is their hip rotations that include Tai sabaki and Tenshin. Tai sabaki is body shifting and Tenshin is body rotation. Both techniques are used for dodging or averting the opponent's attacks. They not only dodge or avert but also get them into a better position to counter attack. Late Master Asai was the true expert of Tenshin and Taisabaki that involved numerous kinds of rotations including a 360 degree turn. While he rotated the blocks and counter attacks were executed. By the time the rotation is done the kumite was already completed. You cannot appreciate this as much until you see a video of the performance while looking down from a camera set on the ceiling. The rotation movements are very smooth and it almost looks like a video of a dance. Especially with Asai sensei the movements are not only in circles but his body waves and ducks. His body will sink to go under a kick or a punch, then he reappears standing right behind the attacker. During the body shifting and rotation he is blocking and counter attacking at the same time. The movements are all in one motion with a beautiful flow of different pitches. They are somewhat like the waves of the ocean but yet different as the moves are totally unpredictable. His moves are all natural and non stopping or one technique is smoothly connected to the next then on to the next until the opponent is totally devastated. I think that is where the beauty appears unlike the artificial circular movements of a dancer.



It is a different level of beauty coming from the ability of an expert who can make the flowing movements in unrehearsed actions. To be able to do this your movements must be not only relaxed but also fluid. The movements must be complex and sophisticated as well as precise and free. At least one Shotokan master, a karate genius left us a perfect example that we can follow if we wish to acquire and master the fluid and circular motions in the linear techniques of Shotokan karate.

押忍

# CHAPTER NINE

## 第九章

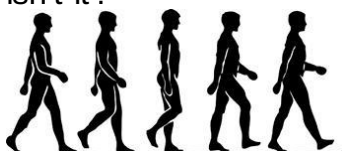
# UNSTABLE BALANCE

## 不安定な安定の謎



What would you say if I told you that “for karate, good balance is bad”? You would probably protest and tell me “bull”. If you think I'm joking, I am sorry but I'm very serious about this. I will explain what I mean as many practitioners, including the senior ones, do not understand this.

First, you will say, “Wait a minute, we practice low kiba dachi to strengthen our legs. We learn how to keep good balance. Now are you trying to tell us that good balance is bad?” Yes, I understand what you are saying and you are right. We need to have strong legs and good stances. I can almost hear you saying, “Now you are telling us that good stances are important. Then good balance is a good thing, isn't it?”



My answer to you is “yes” and “no”. I know you are confused now. Let me explain. I say yes because we are very unique in the mammal species in the way we stand. Specifically we are the only mammal that stands on two legs. We do not stand like a dog or a horse. You will say, “We all know that but why you are making a big deal about this?” I understand why you ask this question but this is exactly why I am making a big deal about this. We, all of us, do not recognize the true uniqueness of bipedal ability we gained as we developed ourselves as homo-sapiens hundreds of thousands of years ago.



We all know that a baby does not learn how to walk from the very beginning. It has to go through a stage of crawling.



In other words, it needs to walk on hands and feet like a dog or a horse. Conveniently its legs are proportionately much shorter so crawling is an easier task than if an adult were to attempt it. We watch a baby about a year old who tries so hard to walk. First you hold out your hands and help him or her. Then eventually you let the hands go for a second or two. The baby balances on his/her own for a second then sits down. This process goes for a few days but he/she will learn how to take a step forward, one step first then two, three, etc.

Before the baby gets to this stage he/she will crawl and he/she can move pretty quickly. Obviously four legs will give you much better balance and requires less skill to keep balance. But we do not remember this when we learned it as we were only one year old. On the other hand, you may remember when you were a toddler and when you learned how to ride a bike. Initially your bike had training wheels, right? The extra two wheels gave the bike 4 wheels.





You needed to spend some painful time by falling many times. But in the end, you learned how to ride a bike (two wheels) which is a special and challenging skill of gaining balance. Anyway, walking with two legs is a mysterious thing and even the scholars have different opinions on why the homo-sapiens chose to stand up when it branched off from the forefather species. As this is not an article on human evolution we will skip the discussion on this particular point. But the importance of the unique walking mechanism must be recognized. As I mentioned earlier we learn how to walk in our first year of life and we forget the process. We remember that we were always walking when we try to remember our first days. This is why we do not want to believe that we are not well balanced and balancing is not an issue when we walk. In fact it is true for most of us that keeping balance as we walk is not an issue.



I challenge you to think this over again. Are we really well balanced with only two legs? People think it is funny when we slip on a banana peel but why? Because we all of a sudden realize that we are not well balanced. If you have learned how to skate or ski, do you remember how you were on your first lesson or the day you stepped onto a skate rink for the first time? I do and I remember clearly how off balanced I was. I had to hang on to the wall of the ice skate rink. No one can skate well from the very beginning. You have to learn how to keep your balance before you learn how to skate or ski. I remember that I had to hold on to the wall like a baby who was trying to learn how to walk.



Let's look at another example. When you need to have good balance in a wrestling match, you naturally get down on your hands and knees or feet. This is the most balanced position you can take.



This concept is the same in martial arts. In Judo they teach you to get into the stance called Jigotai (see a historic photo of Kano, he is on the right). Here a judoka does not get on his hands but he gets the same effect by holding on to his opponent. With the legs of the opponent and holding on to the opponent, the judoka achieved a 4 legged stance or the most balanced stance.



Balance is important also for a karate-ka. This is why we practice a low stance such as kiba dachi for a long time to strengthen our legs. Many readers probably remember a training session when your sensei kept you standing in kiba dachi for 30 minutes or longer. Maybe some

readers had to carry a fellow karate-ka on their shoulders. Yes, all those tough exercises are to strengthen the legs so you will have good balance in your stance.

The most popular stance in Shotokan is definitely zenkutsu-dachi, front stance. Your sensei will tell you to put your feet at shoulder width which is important as you will have a balance problem if your feet are on one line or too narrow. In addition, the sensei will tell you to bend your front knee so you will have a low stance. The low stance is required here again.



Stance, tachi kata in Japanese, is the foundation of karate techniques. The stronger the legs are, the better the balance can be. My sensei told me a parable of a stance as a cannon base and a karate punch as the cannon. If our stance is weak then the cannon base is a row boat. Can you imagine what would happen if you shot a cannon from a small row boat? If your stance is strong and solid it is like having a tank as its base. Talking about a tank, we remember late Enoeda sensei whose nickname in Japan was “tank” because of his powerful technique based on the solid foundation, stance (photo left). OK I am sure you will agree to all that I have described so far. All I wrote was how important good balance is for karate. You knew all this and you might say I am wasting your time. Hopefully I am not wasting your time and you will see as you read further. You also blame me that it is ridiculous to claim that good balance is bad. I am trying to prove to you that my claim is not that ridiculous. Now give me a chance and let me explain why I say, good balance is bad.

OK let me ask you. Is karate made up of dead stops? The picture above shows the finished phase of gyaku zuki. Despite how great that technique was it was done and finished. What I want to say is that karate technique is dynamic and too much importance is given to the end product but more important is the process. In other words no matter how fast and strong that gyaku zuki may be, if he fails to deliver it to the target it has no meaning or it did not accomplish its most important task of punching an opponent. I can hear you say, “We know this. This is why we not only do the in position practice, but also practice a lot of kihon (the correct Japanese term is Ido keiko; “ido” meaning body shifting and “keiko” meaning practice).” As far as I know, none of the instructors teach students, particularly the senior students, to stay off balance. You would ask me, “Did you say ‘stay OFF balance’?” My answer is yes. It may sound crazy but we over emphasize good balance. On the other hand, we miss or ignore another extremely important requirement in karate technique; off balance. Yes you are now asking “What do you mean by that?” so let me explain. Let’s use a good example. If you are a brown belt or above then you must know the popular kihon kata, Bassai Dai. The kamae for this kata is like the photo on the left.



OK when you assume this kamae what does your sensei tell you to do? He/she will command you to take a quick step or jump forward and execute a strong uraken uchi, right? If so, then does she teach you how to do this? In other words, you are in heisoku dachi (closed feet stance) and to take a quick step or jump will require a special technique.

Unfortunately most instructors do not or cannot teach you how to do this. Some may tell you to push off the ground with your left foot. If you are lucky some of the instructors will tell you to bring your right knee up and forward when you want to jump forward. And if you are really lucky and have an excellent instructor he or she will tell you to slightly “lean” forward like the tower of Pisa in Italy. Though this is not exactly the correct posture, he is telling you the

right thing. I will explain exactly how you should posture your body for this kamae later. But for now, let me continue with the explanation for the importance of off balance or unstableness.

Let me bring up another analogy or a visible example to explain what I am trying to say. Just think about holding a stick or bo. To keep the stick upright the easiest way is to grab it firmly with your hand (Fig 1). You can also balance it on your palm (Fig 2).

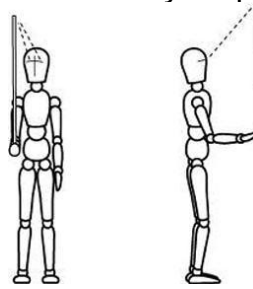


Fig 1 Fig 2

To do this will require a balancing technique. So, what I am saying is, most of us are standing like Fig 1 while the baby is walking more or less like Fig 2. You will say “OK so what? Is this a problem?” This is a very daring thing to say and I risk the possibility of being misunderstood. My answer is “Yes” and here is the core of the point I am trying to make. The ability of standing firm as in Fig 1 is the very problem for all Karateka.

We must maintain the ability of keeping balance as shown in Fig 2. So you will ask, “I don’t understand that being able to stand firmly is a problem and you are saying we need to walk like a baby?” My answer is “Yes” and “No”. Now are you totally confused? Let me continue with my explanation. The ability of being able to stand firmly itself is good but we are holding the stick too hard. What I am saying is, most of us are over using our muscles just to stand up or over compensating with our muscles when we stand, walk and run. I am not talking about just the legs but the backs, hips, torso and neck which mean most of your body muscles. You may not believe this but this is true. Ask yourself if you can stand up for hours without getting tired. If your body was totally relaxed while you stand up you can do it without getting tired. However, most of us will get tired because a lot of unnecessary muscles are being used and the necessary muscles are even tightened up or used too much or more than necessary. Then what is wrong with that? Nothing because all you need to do is to sit down when you get tired. However, if you are a serious karate practitioner or an athlete this subject is very important. Then how is it wrong if you are over tensed or using unnecessary muscles?

Let’s take a look at a couple of the best examples. Though Michael Jordan and Pele have retired many years ago we still remember that they were one of the best basketball and football players.



Jordan was known as Air Jordan as his jump shoot was long and impressive, but I was more impressed with his ability to duck through the defensive players of the opposing team. Those players are all professional athletes and they were the best defenders but Jordan went through them so easily as though those defenders did not even see him. By the way, he used to stick his tongue out while he was dribbling through those defenders (see the photo). There is a good reason for his action. I am not sure if this was discussed by anyone before but this action and his ability of balance are connected. This may be an interesting subject for a future discussion.



Pele was the same. His kicks in the air were impressive. But his magic was his ability to run through the opponents as though they were not there to defend. How could they do this? They were talented. Yes they were, but the secret was both of them were totally relaxed and knew how to lose their balance to get those explosive moves. It is true that they were ball players and not karate practitioners. Look at all the masters like Asai, Enoeda, Kanazawa, Okazaki and the others. They were all flexible and I am not just talking about the hip joints but all other key joints such as the shoulders. In addition, their muscles were all relaxed and I have not known anyone of them to be stiff.

So now you agree that we must be relaxed and not stiff. Then you will ask why we have to be off balance for karate. The simple answer is karate is dynamic. In other words, we need to be able to move very quickly. In a basketball or a football play you need to go around a defender but in karate though the principle of the moves are the same you need to bring your Waza (punch or kick) to the opponent before he can evade or block it. You must have the gravitational pull to initiate your move. But you may argue saying, "I have a set of strong legs so I can push the ground with my rear foot and move forward very quickly. Why do I need the gravitational pull?" This becomes very technical but if you are interested in budo (martial arts) karate then you need to read on. When you need your rear foot or leg to initiate your move there is always a move called Okori (the Japanese word meaning a telltale movement). On the other hand, if you "fall" which is exactly what will happen when you lose your balance there is no Okori thus the opponent cannot detect your initial move. Of course after the initial move you will use your leg muscles and a slight kick off with your rear foot but the difference you can make during the first one hundredth of a second is so critical in a life or death match. This could mean nothing to you if you are not interested in life and death type fighting or budo karate. This also means very little even in a kumite match. Why? It is simply because the decision maker who won or scored is not that person's punch or kick but rather a third party, the eyes of a judge or his imagination. The real winner is never known in a tournament. Yes I am aware that my comment is very controversial and not liked by many but it does not matter as they cannot prove me wrong. Well then am I saying we need to walk like a baby? No, that is not what I am suggesting. What I am suggesting is that we need to learn to know how to be on the tip of balance and off balance. In fact, we need to know the tipping stage where the delicate balance is kept. It is a stage of being in balance but yet almost losing balance. And this is the stage you need to create when we have the kamae of Bassai Dai. Yes, in order to make the explosive first step you need to have this almost off balance stage in your kamae.



So, most of the practitioners would lean forward like the tower of Pisa. However, this is not what you want to do as it will be too visible to the opponent. The tower of Pisa cannot bend in the middle so it has no choice but you do. You can keep your upper body vertical yet you can bring your body forward like the tower of Pisa. How do we do this? You bend your ankle, knee and hip joints so that your upper body is slightly forward of the center of gravity but yet the upper body remains upright. You will have the tower of Pisa effect without leaning forward. The important thing is that you do not push yourself too far to the point you need to lift your heels up. You must be able to keep the heels lightly on the ground but almost leaving it which is the perfect state. By pushing the hips forward slightly you will reach the point where you are barely keeping your balance. This is the stage I call "unstably balanced" which you need to create with Bassai kamae. Then, do we just fall when we start this kata? Or do we kick the ground with our feet? My answer is "No" to both questions. There is an incredible mechanism which not too many instructors will teach students which I will share with the readers. The mechanism is quite simple. All you need to do is to collapse the knees. Just imagine that you have a pin that is, imaginary, keeping your knees together and keeping the legs upright. To

make the initial but quick step forward, you imagine that you pull off this pin from your knees in a quick action. Your body will fall downward but slightly forward as you have pushed your hips forward. By this movement you will get the forward acceleration, believe it or not, faster than you would do by pushing your feet or bringing one leg up as I have seen some practitioners do. The most benefit, however, is not the increase of speed. This is an amazing part of the wisdom of the kata creator which unfortunately seems to have been lost or nearly lost. The movement you will create by shifting your hips forward and falling downward to initiate the first move will be very natural and much less detectable by the opponent. I cannot stress the importance of this subject enough as modern karate has lost interest in the art of invisible or stealth moves. In our regular kumite exercise and even in a kumite tournament this subject is rarely spoken or considered important. Why? It is obvious because the kumite practitioners expect the opponent or opponents to strike either with a punch or a kick.



On the other hand, in a real fighting situation a wise and well trained practitioner must give off an impression that he is not planning or preparing himself for a first strike. In other words you want your opponents to believe that you are not going to attack thus they are somewhat less cautious and more off guard. By acquiring this technique you will be in a position to move sideways (learned from Tekki) and forward (learned from Bassai dai) for taisabaki to dodge the attacks or move forward to strike or counter attack. Your body will be like a stick on a palm. In other words when you are in a fighting or a conflict situation, you will not be standing firmly like a tree. You will be swaying somewhat depending on the positions and the attitudes of the opponents. You will continuously shift your position to the best one and to the ever changing situation of the opponents and environment surrounding you. You will be well prepared to move quickly to all 360 degrees by keeping your body “unstable” and unstably balanced. If you are a tree you cannot move and it takes a lot of energy and time to move a tree from one spot to another. As you often witness in jiyu kumite (free sparring) the movements and actions of the karate-ka are continuous and many techniques are exchanged. This goes on continuously for two minutes or whatever amount of time the rule allows. I hate to say but this is the same in a movie scene of a street fight or a bar fight. A movie cannot adopt the real fight scene which ends in a second, from total stillness, to a knock down by an undetectable, quick action. You will also see this in a Hong Kong kung fu movie including the ones by the famous Bruce Lee that the actors continue to jump up and fight even after getting hit and punched many times in the face. By the way, one of the kung fu styles that is very interesting is the drunken monkey style. You might have seen Jackie Chan play his role comically in one of those movies,



(Jackie Chan: Forbidden Kingdom)

Forbidden Kingdom. By pretending to be drunk you want your opponents to put their guard down but that is not the only purpose. As you have read my writing up to now you can easily figure out that drunken move is exactly the unstable balance which is expected by the opponents. How wise this style is. I am very impressed with the wisdom the ancient masters had.

So I must say a real fight is not fun to watch. In fact, an untrained person will not even see what has happened in front of him. When a budo (martial arts) karate expert moves a little the eye witness will find his opponent on the ground and not understanding how. This is not an exaggeration or a fairy tale. By attaining the unstable balance an expert can move so invisibly or unnoticeably. Whether you believe this or not, it does not matter as you can experiment

yourself and prove what I am saying is true or not. Practice Tekki Shodan to keep the pelvis joints flexible which enables you to shift sideways very quickly. By practicing the first move with the body falling forward method (in Bassai dai and sho) you will learn how to shift forward quickly. By combining those two exercises one can learn to shift almost 360 degrees without any unnecessary effort as well as eliminate the upper body moves that would be a telltale give away.



You may or may not know that with a very close examination of the body, we are unconsciously balancing and counter balancing always as we stand still. This standing still is a result of successfully managing and controlling many different muscles of our entire body. We may be under the impression that our body is totally still and perfectly balanced thus not moving but that is far from the truth. It is going under continuous balancing and counter balancing of all those muscles. In fact, the professional dancers are aware of this and they adopt this concept in their performance. The dancers' major objective is to make their performance beautiful by making their moves natural and smooth. They practice hours to learn how to stand not only on two legs but also on one and they try hard to stay away from looking stiff. They know that they can move smoothly and beautifully only from balance in the state of imbalance. I believe we can learn a lot from this. Even though the dancers are simply trying to have beautiful moves, shouldn't it be our aim too that we are able to move smoothly and naturally?

I suggest that you test this concept of unstable balance in your training menu. I am sure you will discover the surprising easiness of your body movement when you discover the true balance in the state of unstableness.

押忍

# **CHAPTER TEN**

## **第十章**

### **GRAVITATION; YOUR ENEMY OR FOE?**

重力は敵かそれとも味方か？



Have you ever considered the gravitation concept in your karate practice? I assume most of the readers have not added the gravity factor in their training. Many probably disregard it as it has nothing to do with your karate training. Even after hearing that gravity is important you would assess that its effect is miniscule. You could be correct if you do not wish to reach the higher level of karate movements and skills. If you are satisfied with staying at a good Shodan level, you do not need to consider the concept I present to you here. However, if your interest is to reach to the higher level I can tell you discovering the gravitational force and its ignored fact will help you. In fact, the ignorance of this would make the gravitational force as your enemy. Unfortunately, for many practitioners this is the sad truth. The gravitational force is called gravity or gravitation and this universal force gives weight to objects. Because of the gravity we cannot fly like Superman even if we try very hard to jump high. It is a natural phenomenon and all of us are being affected by it all the time. No matter where you go on earth you cannot get away from this natural phenomenon. We all know this very well; however, in our daily life we just do not recognize the force or weight as we feel so “normal”. If you happen to be on the moon then the gravity you would experience is much less



(83.3% less to be exact) and you would feel you are much lighter and you could jump like a grass hopper. In fact, the astronauts have demonstrated that when they landed on the moon. We do not normally notice the gravity in our daily life because we are so adjusted to the feeling of what is happening to our body (the body weight that is tying us down to the earth because of the gravity). Even when you lift a heavy bag, you will not say “Boy the gravity is making this bag heavy.” We simple think that the bag is heavy.

Only a few can run 100 meters less than 10 seconds but we never think that the gravity is preventing us from doing so. We blame our legs for not being strong enough to run that fast. The same thing can be said about your Kumite exercise. You wish you could move a bit faster, but you do not blame the gravity for preventing you from moving faster or it is slowing you down. OK enough is said that the gravity force is there and we should recognize it. But so what? How does that recognition help? You realized that the gravity can be your enemy and its recognition itself can lead to an improvement.

We recognized that the gravity is the universal law of physics. So you would believe there is nothing you can do about this. We cannot reduce gravity so some may suggest that we reduce our weight. Yes, this idea would work and



I also recommend that those who are overweight would go on a diet. Some others may suggest that we can strengthen our legs. If we had the legs like those of Usain Bolt then we could run faster and that may be true. Should we be on the leg machine instead of practicing kata? Many in fact do that but my recommendation is not this. I emphatically tell you having the legs like Bolt will not help you much in Karate (sorry Usain). OK then, what do we need to move faster? Now, this is where it can be tricky. The answer is that we need to leverage the



gravity. You will say “You said that the gravity was the enemy. Now you are saying we use the enemy to improve our speed?” You are right and we must learn to use or leverage gravity to our advantage. For many practitioners the gravity is working against them. I already mentioned about the overweightness; if you are overweight you will move slower than when you are lighter. This is true and staying light is a requirement to all karate practitioners regardless of the age. Even if you are in shape and your weight is in line, you will move slower if you do not use gravity to your advantage.



Let me elaborate using Usain Bolt, the fastest man on earth. When he starts in his 100 meter dash how does he stand? As he is so fast, does he stand casually at the start of the race? No, he does not stand straight up but instead he crouches down and leans his head down and forward with his hips raised high. Why does he do this? Because this is the most effective method to shift his body from the speed of zero (standing still) to his maximum speed so he can run 100 meters in less than 10 seconds. The most important point in this mechanism here is that fundamentally he needs to fall forward. The key word here is “fall”. He does this by positioning the heavy body part, his head very forward and down. If the runner picked up the supporting hands and if he did not jump forward he will surely fall flat on his face. In order to avoid this, the runner will take the quick steps forward and those movements translate to a quick acceleration of his body forward.



Of course, the runner is not simply falling forward. He uses the push off by his feet against the starting blocks and using his leg muscles he dashes forward. This starting method is universal as it has been proved to produce the quickest start. Once the start occurs he will bring his head more upright to continue his running. To run faster we normally just think of our legs and try to take the steps faster. In other words we believe the key to increase the speed is to increase the pitch. We rarely think of leaning our upper body forward to increase the running speed. Anyway, this chapter is not to discuss the running mechanism though it is a very interesting subject. However, I wrote this much because the principle of body shifting in karate and that of short distance running have the same concept. On the other hand, the objectives of these two athletic movements are quite different. The idea of running is to carry the body over a long distance (i.e. 100 meters) to a goal in the fastest way possible. On the other hand, in karate the distance you need to cover is probably less than 2 meters in most situations. If the distance happens to be greater than that then a karate practitioner would simply wait till the opponent moves into the critical distance, ma-ai (間合).

That distance means a distance where he or his opponent can strike you with one step or one move. I am sure I do not need to go deep in this particular subject as most of the readers understand the meaning of critical ma-ai and its concept. What is required for the karate-ka is an ability to move a short distance (less than 2 meters) in a very quick way. Of course, there are other requirements to his body shifting and one of them is invisibility. His moves must be as invisible as possible or his initial motion must not to be detected by his opponent. This is a very important point in martial arts but it has not been fully recognized nor appreciated mainly because of the popularity of tournament kumite. In a tournament kumite both competitors know each other's intention and stealth moves have little value in this situation. In a real fight this ability is critical and it almost determines who wins. These moves are highly complex and sophisticated. Indeed, these requirements are very challenging and difficult to master and this necessitates a certain technique and a special training. I wrote another chapter on how to keep one's balance while its balance is very unstable. As I explained in that chapter you need

to shift the center of gravity in your body so that you will be in a state of balance in unstableness which is a state that you will fall if you have a little tap on your shoulder. Without showing this to your opponent you are leaning like a tower of Pisa. Another analogy was the water that is held by a dam. The collected water in higher elevation has a hidden energy. The water will rush out through a gate and that energy is used to turn a turbine to create an electrical power. So to move quickly you need to leverage the gravity. This is extremely important as not too many instructors are aware or appreciate this fact.



The ability to move quickly is not the only benefit we can get from gravity. In fact, there is another key benefit. The picture here is a very famous one (at least in Japan). The person in the picture here (left) is Kenwa Mabuni, the founder of Shito ryu with his son leaning against him. This picture illustrates the power of Tokiho which literally means a method or rule of falling wood. Once the gravitational force is behind a light person without applying any extra force, a bigger and stronger person has a problem of sustaining his position or pushing the light person back. So you say, "OK so what? Karate is punches and kicks. This method and rule may be good for Judo or Jujitsu but how would it affect my karate techniques?" I understand why you ask this question. In an average karate lesson or a dojo this subject is not normally taught or even mentioned. After learning the basic stances and sonoba geiko which literally means "in position practice", we learn ido geiko, shifting practice. The first thing in ido geiko you would learn is probably stepping punch and the illustration here is the image of the technique you learn. After a while your sensei will get you into kumite, or sparring, and the first kumite you learn is either gohon kumite or sanbon kumite. What you discover here is that your senpai, senior students easily block your punches. Yes they are your seniors so they are faster. You may not question this but you feel your punches are not that powerful. When you do the counter punch with your gyaku zuki you are not certain if that punch can honestly knock out the opponent if you really wanted to. So, you put more power to your punches and your sensei tells you to relax. "What shall I do next?" you wonder. Then you discover makiwara, a great karate invention (I wrote a chapter on this in my first book, Shotokan Myths). You spend hours punching this darn thing. Bang! Bang! Bang! You put more hip rotation and the banging sound gets louder. Wow this is wonderful. You love it! OK I sound sarcastic but this is the image of a tough karate-ka to many of the readers. The eternal question is "how do you get a power in karate technique?" So, the Shotokan masters in the 20<sup>th</sup> century invented a concept of kime meaning "total tension" or focused power. You are supposed to tense all your muscles of your body and by attaining this you will get a great power. I wrote a chapter of this in Shotokan Myths so read it as I call this a myth. I am sure you have tried this but found yourself being stiff and ridged instead of a great power. So, you will say, "OK then what else can we do?"



Let me mention that one person also asked the same question some 60 to 70 years ago and discovered a method. His name is Shigeru Egami 江上 茂 (1912-1981), one of Funakoshi's disciples and the founder of Shotokai. He believed that relaxing the upper body was the key requirement.



His idea was to shift or take steps very quickly without making any kime with your body. You can watch the video clips of Shotokai kata and you will see how they move. Egami believed in bending the front knee extremely forward as seen here in the picture. In this stance the center of gravity is much more forward than the standard stance we learned in JKA Shotokan. I suspect, after trying many different ideas Egami must have reached this conclusion from the idea of Tokiho which I described earlier. By bending the front knee so much forward you will get to a point where you will fall forward. It makes sense but Shotokai did not become a major Shotokan organization mainly because it denounced all tournaments.

On the other hand, JKA became the dominant organization in the 60's and 70's but did not take up the concept of extreme knee bending. Instead it adopted the concept of "kime". It is very interesting as those two organizations branched out of the same founder, Funakoshi, yet the concepts of those two organizations are so vastly different. So, you will ask if I am proposing that we should adopt this concept of extreme knee bending. My answer is yes and no. In kihon kumite such as ippon kumite I think this is a good idea to adopt as you can shift faster. It is also good to adopt the low stances in kata to train your legs. So I say yes to those exercises and particularly for the junior students. On the other hand, I say no to the senior students. For the free sparring and in street fight situations having this stance will be a joke. I have never seen how Shotokai practitioners fight in jiyu kumite and they denounced tournaments, shiai. I suppose they believe in making power by shifting quickly and not from the extreme contraction of the upper body. I would like to hear from the Shotokai practitioners on this point for my education. In the end what is my point? I wanted to point out the relationship between the gravitation and the power. In Shotokai they adopted extreme knee bending and relaxing upper body. In JKA style Shotokan we adopted kime which made us look stiff and in fact made us move slower.



So you will say, "Get to the point" and I will. We need to learn to move quickly as it generates power. See the picture here. I believe this is a picture of Takayuki Mikami (on the right) in one of the All Japan national tournaments of JKA in the late 50's. This is a perfect picture to show how to generate power. You can see his right fist is moving forward for an oi zuki. His opponent is standing straight up so Mikami could probably knock this guy out if he wanted to. He did not need to put power in his arm as his body movement was carrying so much energy with him it must have been a knock-out punch. In a tournament you must show your strong punch with your arm in order to get a point. In reality a person who has this body position can simply extend his arm with little power in the arm and he can still produce a similar impact to the opponent. Of course, if you want to maximize the total power, adding the energy generated by the arm will help.

OK so you understand that the benefits of gravity can give you speed and power. Some people may say, "Why do I feel heavy and my moves are slow?" First of all, I must ask you "Is your weight in line?" If you are overweight then of course you are heavy. Get light and stay slim. If your weight is in line and you still feel slow, read the chapter of "Unstable balance". To move fast in karate the key is initial movement and it requires a technique. Learn the concept and the technique then you will be able to make your initial move faster. Then how do you speed up the techniques? It all comes from relaxation. If you have unnecessary tensions in your body that will act as the brake in your car so they will slow you down. Relaxation of your muscles is required to produce smooth and natural body movements whether the movements are circular or linear.

I want to add an observation of how kumite is fought recently and I am talking about jiyu kumite particularly of the tournaments. I see two fighters continuously hopping all through the kumite match in the recent tournaments.



When I was competing in the 70's I rarely saw that type of fighting style. However, I remember discussing this topic with my karate friends in the 70's after we saw one Bruce Lee movie. The title, I believe, is Way of the Dragon and Lee's opponent was Chuck Norris in his movie debut.

The mixed style fighting was taking place in a dramatic scene of the Coliseum in Rome (photo above). Some of the readers probably have seen this movie but the story goes like this. Norris was a good karate fighter and an assassin who was sent to kill Lee. In the early part of the fight Lee fought from a still stance and Norris was beating him up. So after he got beaten up Lee changed his fighting style to hopping and in the end, of course, Lee won. I thought it was interesting because he made the story in the way that he wins by changing his fighting style, particularly to this hopping style. While we were watching the movie, we laughed for we thought that Lee's fighting style was funny as the change was drastic and unnatural. Even though I laughed at this scene, I thought Lee was an excellent movie director as he must have gotten this idea from the fighting style of Muhammad Ali (Ali on the right and Joe Frazier on the left) who was very popular in those years as he had light footing despite the fact he was a heavy weight champion.



Lee used this idea in his own movie though this was not something he learned from his master of Wing Chung, Ip Man in Hong Kong (photo below).



There seems to be a popular debate if Lee was a great martial artist. I will not go into this in this chapter but I want to add my personal observation and evaluation. He definitely was a good actor but I do not consider him to be a great martial artist as many people wish to believe. This is a controversial subject and I am aware my opinion does not make me popular or liked. I may touch this subject more in details sometime in the future and explain why I judge his martial art level to be not so superior.

Let us go back to the current kumite style, hopping. As I mentioned earlier the fighting style in the tournaments in the 70's was different and it changed somewhere in the middle of the 80's. Did it change because of this Bruce Lee movie? No, I do not think that was the reason. Is this because it is a better fighting style? This is a tricky question and my answer is yes and no. Yes, because it works in most kumite shiai that we have these days especially the WKF style sports karate. Why is it so? One good reason is hopping is used to hide the attacking

movements. It is used as fake movement. In other words, if you are moving all the time then it is difficult for the opponent to determine when an attack is going to be made. Another reason is hopping will require some relaxation of the legs which helps to generate fast leg movements.



It is true that after a hop the bounced off energy can be used to initiate a fast move forward. The hopping is also used as an idling of a car. The idling should be done within the body but it requires a high level of skills so most of the people have to use the hopping for this action. Those are the good points of the hopping action but the main reason why it is popular now is the change of the rule. The scoring standard has changed drastically when sports karate was introduced to JKA in 1982 when it joined WUKO. I competed in the first WUKO National Championship in 1982 so I experienced this as I fought against other styles practitioners such as Shito ryu and Goju ryu. You can score with a much lighter punch now and that kind of punch or a kick would have been rejected as “not enough power” in a 70’s shiai. To get a score we had to crouch low and jump forward with a punch or a kick. Which style is better is not an issue. One is sports and the other is closer to budo. Look at the wild animals.



When a lion or a tiger hunts for prey what does it do? It crouches and jumps forward when it attacks. You never see a lion or a tiger hopping around in an effort to catch a deer. You will see the hopping when the dogs are playing around but never when they fight. Just think if you were in a street fight and if your opponent has a knife or a stick, would you still hop as you fight?



Then what is wrong with the hopping action? From the martial arts perspective your idea is not to show any intention of attack. Hopping action definitely shows one’s intention to fight. Secondly, when you hop and when you are in the air (unless it is used to execute an attack), you are suspended in the air which is definitely a suki, an opening or a moment when it is most difficult to defend. Thirdly, if you hop in the same rhythm your opponent will learn your rhythm which means a disadvantage to you. Enough said about the kumite in the tournaments of recent years.

### **Conclusion:**

If you wish to move faster and to gain the extra power in your techniques remember to do the following. First, stay in shape and keep your body weight in line. Learn to relax more and train yourself to feel the center of gravity in your body which we call Seichushin. You must train yourself to gain the ability to feel when you intentionally break the balance to move (to any direction). The more challenging part is to know the very point when you will tip from that balanced state to off balanced. Then the most challenging is to stay at that strange and difficult state called balance in unstableness. By being able to do this you are always in the position or a state to move quickly. To gain power, deliver or execute the technique as you are moving toward the opponent or a target. Avoid executing the techniques from a still stance or after your body shifting is stopped as you are not using the gravity most effectively.

Now do you feel the gravity can be your friend and not so much your enemy? When you understand this you will also understand why the ancient masters did not need to take low stances or any stance at all. They would assume natural stance then simply walk normally

toward the opponents. That is the ultimate method for fast and strong techniques as they are in harmony with gravity.



# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## 第十一章

# MYSTERY OF KARATE MASTER

## 空手の達人の謎



What would one expect of a karate “master” upon meeting him? We know the Shotokan's Dojo Kun starts with “Perfection of character”. If a practitioner is 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> dan and has practiced karate for over 40 years, which would mean he must have recited the Dojo Kun daily for those years, wouldn't he be expected to be a person of high morale who is leading a healthy life? A great example of a karate master is Gichin Funakoshi (1868-1957), the founder of Shotokan karate, typically called the father of modern day karate. Funakoshi was in his 50s when he moved to Tokyo from Okinawa to introduce karate to the Japanese people. He was a retired teacher and he could have enjoyed an easy retired life in Okinawa, but he chose to leave his entire family behind and live meagerly in Tokyo until his death at 89 years of age. He did not have any friends nearby, let alone relatives, until his sons joined him many years later. As he mainly taught university students, he did not make much money. He certainly was not seeking financial gain or fame since karate was practically unknown in Japan when he introduced it in 1921.



He was a dedicated person who desired only the recognition of this martial art and believed in the benefit of karate practice for the Japanese people. He never had a dan rank in his life and did not need a high rank to show he was a karate master. All the people who were associated with him came to respect him and considered him a true master.

Another good example is Masatoshi Nakayama (1913-1987), the founder and the first Chief Instructor of the Japan Karate Association (JKA). He was widely respected not only by JKA members but also by practitioners of other styles and by other organizations. When Japan lost in WWII in 1945, the Allied forces banned all of the martial arts including kendo, judo and jujitsu. Kendo had to wait until the end of the occupation in 1952 to form the All Japan Kendo Federation. Funakoshi and Nakayama worked together and won an exception to the rule and founded the JKA in 1949. Nakayama was a man of character and a gentleman who respected all karate practitioners whether Japanese or non-Japanese. I am sure that all who read this will agree about the two great Masters: Funakoshi and Nakayama. In addition, I am sure there are other masters who are excellent in both karate and character.

I personally know two sensei who were true masters: Jun Sugano (my first sensei, former co-chairman of the JKA, 9<sup>th</sup> dan) and Tetsuhiko Asai (my last sensei, the founder of the JKS, 10<sup>th</sup> dan). Lack of space prevents me from explaining in detail why I consider them to be true masters but I can say a few things that I believe would be the qualifications for a true master. Both sensei were excellent in karate.





I do not need to explain anything about Asai sensei, as he was globally known as a karate genius. Sugano sensei was not well known as he stayed away from the JKA headquarters and was never publicized. When he taught, none of us students wished to be picked when he demonstrated some techniques. His fist was like a hammer. He never hit hard but you could feel it. He told me that Teruyuki Okazaki (Chairman of ISKF, 10<sup>th</sup> dan) was an excellent fighter but that he always avoided him, Sugano, during *kumite* training. This was during the 1960's and before Okazaki moved to the USA. Both sensei were firm and tough in their teaching but never violent or abusive. Their training was always challenging and unique but they were always stimulating and educational. Both of them were first class educators and instructors. In addition, they were exemplary in their handling of money and power. A student's time and interest in karate were more important than their money. They were also disinterested in the titles and the power that could be attained from the organizations to which they belonged. Sugano became a co-Chairman of JKA not because it was what he desired but because the board of directors unanimously recommended him for his character.



Both Sugano and Asai were non-political and accepted any practitioners from any organizations and styles. They were confident in their karate and they were not motivated by financial gain. Then, were they perfect and without any shortcomings? Unfortunately, that was not the case. Both of them had drinking problems when they were young. However, they never had any embarrassing incidents due to their drinking habits, as far as one knows. However, heavy drinking when they were young certainly resulted in unhealthy conditions when they reached their 60's and unfortunately it shortened their lives. Both of them passed in their early 70's and indeed it was too young for them to go.



Now here is a big question: are those masters the standard in Shotokan karate? Unfortunately, that is not the case. Very sadly, I have heard more negative comments than positive ones about many of the karate "masters" during my trips around the world. Here are some of the frequent reports I have received; "Our dojo received some well-known instructors from Japan and I expected them to behave like the masters. Honestly, I was very much disappointed in them. In fact, I was embarrassed sometimes by their behaviors and actions." The embarrassing behaviors include situations when a "master" got heavily drunk and could not walk straight and threw up in the restroom. I heard about a "master" who wanted to spend a night with a teenage female student. I also hear frequently about a certain "master" who behaves extremely aggressively to gain financial returns. I have also met many innocent (or maybe naïve) students who were shocked to see the "masters" chain smoking. These disappointed people tell me, "Why do they do this? I expected them to lead a healthy life and keep high moral standards." I can truly understand their confusion and disappointment. Such

masters are all high-ranking sensei, some reside in Japan and the others have migrated and live overseas.

I have witnessed some incidents myself and have heard many “horror” or embarrassing stories. One story I can share comes from a Canadian instructor who invited a high-ranking Japanese instructor to visit from the US. The Japanese instructor demanded to be taken to the most expensive French restaurant, one where an average meal cost several hundred dollars per person, especially so since he would order very expensive wine. The Japanese instructor liked the restaurant and demanded that the Canadian host take him there the following night. The host had to refuse his request as it not only exceeded his budget but he was already in the red. The Japanese instructor did not show any understanding of the host's budgetary situation, he simply got very upset when his wish was not met. Another story comes from Europe. One Japanese instructor suggested that a female student visit him before a dan exam if she wanted to pass. This visit was to take place in his hotel room, the night before the exam. This story was hard for me to believe but the person who told it to me said it was true.

As a Japanese karate instructor myself, this is painfully embarrassing and I feel it is my responsibility to do something about it. Therefore, I feel it is my duty to raise this subject and to resolve the mystery of the “master”. I wish to share my knowledge to western readers so that they will have the right expectations when it comes to a karate master. I hope I can shed some light on this mystery of Shotokan karate (I specifically say Shotokan karate as I have no knowledge or information pertaining to this subject concerning the other styles.)

Many people were disappointed in what they found in some of the masters. On the other hand, some people claim it is good enough if the practitioner is an expert in karate and the master's character is of little concern. They are, according to them, simply looking for karate skills and not a spiritual or a moral leader since this is not a religion. Even if the sensei's personality and behavior are poor and bad, such people still respect the karate experts, as they are good in karate. They would ask, “Why do we expect karate masters to have high moral standards when we do not expect the same from coaches and trainers of other athletic events like boxing, wrestling, football, etc.?” For them, karate is simply a sport and nothing more. I understand their point of view. On the other hand, many believe karate can be more than a sport with added benefits. For such people, what they practice is karatedo. The word “do” brings a different meaning to karate. It makes the whole learning and practicing process a way of life. In karatedo our goal of improvement does not stop with fighting skills but goes far beyond to include one's character, principles and even outlook on life. Karate skill is like a gun that in itself is neutral. It can be good or bad depending how it is used and by whom. If a policeman, to protect a citizen, uses it, then that gun is good. If a robber uses it in a bank robbery then that gun is bad. Karate skill can be considered in the same way. It can be good or bad depending on how the practitioner uses it. We may not expect our police officers to have perfection of character but we definitely expect them to be honest, fair and upholders of justice. Will you accept a police officer who lies or is an alcoholic or a drug addict? We also expect our police officers to be in shape but that is another subject. Sadly, the national tendency in the US towards obesity is also reflected in the police force. I have a great respect for the police officers' job and their work to keep our society safe. However, when I see an overweight policeman I ask myself, “Can he protect himself, let alone a civilian, if there is a fight or an encounter with criminals?” I chuckle to myself when I see that the prisoners in a jail are overall in much better physical shape than many of the guards.

We must have high expectations of those masters teaching karatedo. Unfortunately, many masters do not qualify. Why has 30 or 40 years of karate training not automatically produced a practitioner with a high degree of character? It is obvious that reciting the Dojo Kun thousands of times is not good enough. Let me list several reasons why years of karate training failed to create masters.

### **Reason 1:**

Karate, particularly Shotokan, became popular in the 1960's mainly because many young and powerful instructors were sent by JKA and Shotokai. Many of them later decided to migrate to the western countries.

Let's look at the ages of some of the now famous Shotokan experts who migrated to Europe and the USA.

- Hidetaka Nishiyama (USA): born in 1928, he moved to the US in 1960 at the age of 32.
- Teruyuki Okazaki (USA): born in 1931, he was 30 when he moved to the US in 1961.
- Keinosuke Enoda (UK): born in 1935, he was 30 years old when he moved to the UK in 1965.
- Taiji Kase (France): born in 1929, he left Japan at the age of 35 to teach overseas. Between 1964 and 1966 he taught in countries such as South Africa, Germany and Italy. He was 38 when he finally settled in France.
- Hideo Ochi (Germany): born in 1940, he moved to Germany when he was 30 years old in 1970.
- Hiroshi Shirai (Italy): born in 1937, he made a world trip with Kase and Enoda to promote karate, eventually he settled in Milan Italy. He left Japan in 1965 when he was only 27.
- Tsutomu Oshima (USA): born in 1930, started karate training in 1948 and move to California in 1955 when he was only 25 years old with 7 years of karate experience.
- Mitsusuke Harada (UK): born in 1928, initially he moved to Brazil in 1955 at age 27 then moved to the UK in 1963 when he was 35 years old.

In the 1950's and 1960's, Japan was extremely poor and there were not enough jobs, especially for karate instructors. At that time thousands migrated to Brazil, Bolivia, Hawaii, Peru, etc.,



to become farmers. It was a very natural course of action for a hungry population to think of migration. Those who migrated had to be very young since older people would not be able to endure the anticipated poor and harsh living conditions. The same thing was true of the karate instructors. They were very young when they left Japan without any support from the organizations to which they belonged. Harada was probably the only exception as he got a position at Bank of South America in Sao Paulo Brazil in 1955. They were totally on their own as far as the financial situation was concerned. In the 1960's, the JKA was so poor that they could not even pay their instructors in Tokyo a sufficient salary, so it was impossible for them to send any money to their overseas instructors. I believe this condition had a great impact on how those instructors developed their minds and how they conducted the business aspect of karate operations. I am not questioning whether or not any of those instructors listed above would qualify as masters. Other than Okazaki I have not known any of these instructors personally so I cannot judge if they are or are not true masters. I only know them by what is publicly known to all of us. If any of those instructors failed to achieve the true qualities of a master then their living conditions must have been a part of the cause.

### **Reason 2:**

Many instructors consider karate a full time job. This in itself is not necessarily bad or wrong. It is certainly fair of them to ask for monetary compensation for their teaching. I have been teaching karate since the early 1970's. I have always had a separate non-karate job and kept karate as a part time job so that I would not fall into a money temptation trap. When instructors look at their students as customers and the means to bringing them a comfortable life, their whole attitude and behavior will change. They will have to compromise and make many concessions. The instructors' main interest becomes making money from the students. The amount of attention given to the development of the students' karate level becomes very questionable. I have heard of a few masters who are known to "sell" the dan diploma. If an instructor is paying more attention to your money than your karate skills then that instructor must not be called master.

### **Reason 3:**

Why would a high-ranking instructor from a globally recognized organization do some embarrassing things? I know this is puzzling to many readers. I think a part of the blame falls on western people. This may come as a surprise to some of my readers and I am not passing the buck to westerners. Remember that you adored those Japanese masters and put them on a pedestal some 30 or 40 years ago. Some instructors were treated like gods, without exaggeration. They got used to it quickly which resulted in arrogance and overexpectation. Once they started to act like gods it became more difficult for westerners to say “no” and to change. Some westerners confessed to me, “We assumed that kind of thing was normal in Japan so we believed we had to do it.” I told them that even if that had been the case in Japan (though it isn’t) they should not permit it in their own countries when such a behavior is not acceptable or reasonable. The Japanese instructors must respect the cultures and etiquettes of the countries they are visiting or in which they are residing. Even though I am a Japanese instructor myself, I call what is not right, wrong. Thus, I recommend that the western people who host Japanese instructors stand up and refuse any of the unreasonable requests that they may make. The Japanese instructors need to come down to the “human” level and to be treated equally. Would it be considered disrespectful? Not if you communicate respectfully. Of course, you cannot treat them like hired consultants. The instructors have a good deal of self-pride and the services they offer are not a commercial product. However, it is still a business proposition so it is wise to clarify what has been agreed upon and what is unacceptable. Though, ideally, these matters would be discussed and clarified in advance of the instructor’s visit, in many cases the requests and demands come after an instructor has arrived. If a request from an instructor exceeds what you had agreed to, or if it is unacceptable, it is best to express this honestly and clearly.

Master Funakoshi was a gentleman. He wanted to teach karate to university students as a way for them to develop courage and etiquette. He knew those were qualities that were necessary to the formation of a gentleman. However, to his disappointment, he must have found some students did not follow his example. First of all, the university students had only 4 years to learn karate, much too short a time to learn the true essence of karate even if they practiced every day in those years. Some of them dropped out with only a couple of years of karate training, not enough time to become proficient but long enough for them to become bullies. In the pre-WWII era, macho or tough behavior was encouraged in university students. Military factions ruled the Japanese government and university students were the officer candidates for future military service.

Master Funakoshi did not want to teach karate for students to turn into thugs or violent officers in the end. He could not preach much as he would sound like he was going against what the military department wanted. His solution was to introduce the Dojo Kun with the five principles he believed in. He made it a rule that all students would recite those five principles after every training session.



These Kun are short but they are the essence of Funakoshi karate. This tradition has been handed down for decades. Master Funakoshi himself set an example of how a gentleman should live. He might have created many gentleman karate-ka before WWII but many of them were killed during the war in which Japan was devastated. When the war ended, and when Japanese organizations started to dispatch its instructors. Japan was extremely poor, a third world country. This seems almost unbelievable considering the prosperity Japan enjoys today. The Japanese instructors, who were dispatched overseas, to be frank, were neither well prepared nor educated. They were poor and few of them were educated to be gentlemen. They were, in fact, very young, in their 20's and 30's, with only 10 to no more than 15 years of Karate training behind them. I do not mean to single out Oshima but in his case he had merely 7 years (from 1948 to 1955) of karate training. They were sent out into a world where people

knew very little about Karate. These young instructors were fast and strong, many of them from JKA were Japan national champions. They became masters in a short matter of time. I do not know if these masters continued their training to deserve a title of “master” and improved their character. I feel they were obligated to demonstrate the principles of the Dojo Kun and to lead their students by example, as Master Funakoshi did. Unfortunately, some became arrogant and power hungry. Some chose to be politicians and businessmen in order to expand their territories and their financial gains.

Many of the western practitioners now have more than 30 and even 40 years of hard Karate training. I dare say their level is equivalent, if not better, to that of the original Japanese instructors when they migrated to the US and Europe. The responsibility of the western instructors is not to repeat the mistakes that some of the Japanese instructors have made during the last 40 years. I sincerely hope the western instructors will strive to reach higher in their quest not only in karate skills but also in the principles of the Dojo Kun.

What do western instructors need to do to reach an ultimate goal?

Here are some requirements:



1. Improve real karate skills. If you are 30 or 40 years old and have just retired from the tournament circuit, do not stop training. Now is the time to start practicing real karate and training more. Frankly speaking, tournament karate is only a small part of karate. There is much more than just *gyaku zuki* and *maegeri*. Learn and achieve the higher arts such as *ikken hissatsu* (one punch sure kill), *sunkei* (one inch punch), *tenketsu* (*dim mak*) and *ki* or *chi*.
2. Continue to train daily and keep the high level of karate skills until you are in your 70's, 80's and beyond. Do not injure your knees and backs from incorrect training. The real masters must be able to demonstrate excellent techniques just as Master Asai did when he was in his 70's. If you are in your 50's and 60's then you must not make excuses by saying, “I used to be able to do this and that.” Karate is always what you can do now and never how it was before.
3. Learn to separate karate from money. Do not make Karate into a business so that you can teach what you believe in without the fear of losing students. It is best to have a separate business or a full time job so that your living is not dependent on the income from karate. When an instructor sells a dan rank he is selling his soul. Do not sell your soul if you wish to be a true master.
4. Stay away from the politics of karate. It will take too much of your valuable time away from your own training and teaching. People follow you because your karate is truly excellent and not because you are a big shot in a large organization.
5. Study kinesiology and physiology so that you understand how the body works. Through thorough knowledge and understanding of the body and its mechanisms we can not only move our body in the most effective way but we can also teach and share this knowledge to others properly.
6. Study the history of karate and expand your experience to other martial arts. You will have a much better understanding of your karate by learning how Shotokan was created and how other martial arts are related. Learn how other styles of karate are practiced and compare them to your practice of Shotokan karate. By doing this you will have a much better understanding of Shotokan karate and you will be able to expand this to something beyond, as Master Asai did.

Some readers may ask, "Can a western instructor really become a karate master?" My answer is very clear, "Yes, very possible". A karate master does not need to be Japanese or Asian. If a western instructor can develop all the qualities and abilities necessary then he certainly can be a karate master. It would please me greatly to see many true karate masters among western karate-ka in the future. Furthermore, I would love to see some of those western karate masters teach Japanese students and show them the true budo karate. Should that happen, I am sure many narrow-minded Japanese instructors would be upset but I sincerely hope that such a surprising turn of events would be a wake-up call to them. It would be very beneficial for Japanese karate if it could make them realize that they cannot be arrogant and lazy. That would benefit not only Japanese karate but also the karate of the world.

押忍

# CHAPTER TWELVE

第十二章

## SHU HA RI

守破離

Shu Ha Ri is not a concept that enjoys as much popularity as karatedo, budo or zen in the western world. On the other hand, this is a fairly popular concept not only in martial arts but all arts in Japan. Wikipedia describes it as “**Shuhari** (Kanji: 守破離 Hiragana: しゅはり) is a Japanese martial art concept, and describes the stages of learning to mastery. It is sometimes applied to other Japanese disciplines, such as Go.” It further describes the meaning of the concept using the statement by an Aikido master, Shihan Seishiro Endo, ““It is known that, when we learn or train in something, we pass through the stages of shu, ha, and ri. These stages are explained as follows. In shu, we repeat the forms and discipline ourselves so that our bodies absorb the forms that our forbearers created. We remain faithful to the forms with no deviation. Next, in the stage of ha, once we have disciplined ourselves to acquire the forms and movements, we make innovations. In this process the forms may be broken and discarded. Finally, in ri, we completely depart from the forms, open the door to creative technique, and arrive in a place where we act in accordance with what our heart/mind desires, unhindered while not overstepping laws.”



The explanation above is not sufficient so I will attempt to put more meat on its bones. Before I go into the meaning of Shu Ha Ri and the deeper meaning of the concept, I would like to share some back ground of how this concept started. The person who started this concept was Fuhaku Kawakami, born in a samurai family (1719). Until the age of 16 he was raised as a samurai and there is nothing unusual about his early life. But what happened later in his life made him unique and interesting. When he was 16 his samurai master ordered him to become a student of a famous tea master, Joshinsai in Kyoto who was the 7<sup>th</sup> generation of the founder of Omotesenke. The master's order was not only to learn the art of tea ceremony but for him to become a tea ceremony teacher which he did when he was 31 years old. This age sounds young to us but you need to remember the average life expectancy was less than 50 in those years so 31 was definitely not young then. To earn the title of tea master Fuhaku had to spend 15 years of his life totally in the pursuit of the mastery of tea ceremony. After receiving the teaching credential he started to teach tea ceremony in Edo (modern day Tokyo) and his style is called Edo Senke. I suspect the western readers would wonder why in the world a samurai master would order his man to do this which seems to have nothing to do with samurai or martial arts. Maybe some of the readers are into Japanese history and the culture of samurai. Some of you may know the relationship between samurai and tea ceremony. For many others it may be a mystery why tea ceremony became so important to the samurai.



To understand this we need to take a look at the unique features of the chashitsu, tea room. Before the Sengoku period, the space of a tea room was somewhat larger, 4jo han (四畳半). 畳 means Tatami, a straw mat the Japanese use for the floor and it is also used to measure the size of a room. For instance if you say “My room is 6 jo” it means your room fits 6 tatami mats. One tatami mat is 88 centimeters by 176 centimeters. For the convenience of putting those mats in a room, the width is exactly the half of the length. The typical room is a 6 mat room and a 4.5 mat room is considered small. Anyway, as Sengoku period started, Chanoyu became very popular among the samurai and this activity was developed into Sado. Interestingly the room size shrunk as it became more popular. The typical Sado room is now 3



jo (3 mats). It could barely fit a small fire place for the boiling water, the ceremony master and one or two guests to sit. The concept here is the simplicity and frugality. They also enjoy the closeness between the ceremony master and the guests. The heritage of this concept is still visible in Japan now. If you have visited Japan in recent years you will notice this. You do not even need to visit somebody's house. You'll find hotel rooms to be comparatively smaller than those you find in the US and Europe. If you visit restaurants in Tokyo you will really feel the closeness of the other customers. They sit you so closely next to another customer; sometimes you cannot bring your elbow up to eat. More interestingly, the entrance to Chashitsu is so small (less than a meter square, see the photo) the master and the guests must crawl into the room. The idea is this entrance will force every participant to bow down and teaches you to be humble. This tradition is carried over to the modern days. You will find in front of many restaurants in Japan a cloth which looks like a flag being held sideways hanging at the entrance. This cloth is not to keep the flies from entering the shop as you rarely see them in Japan. This cloth typically has the store name dyed and used to advertise its name. These days a restaurant can have a bigger sign on the roof so it looks like they do not need it but they keep this tradition while the foreigners wonder why they have this annoying thing in front of the restaurant. It is interesting as everyone has to bow to get in a restaurant even though they are the customers.



OK, now you understand that simplicity and humbleness are an integral part of Chanoyu and you can see those characters would impress the samurai. But the reason is still not clear why the samurai took the tea ceremony so seriously. Believe it or not it is because of one concept of the tea ceremony; Ichigo Ichie. Indeed that concept hit the hearts of the samurai. Let us find out what this concept is all about. I will quote the explanation of this cultural concept from Wikipedia here;

***“Ichigo ichi-e (一期一会, literally “one time, one meeting”) is a Japanese term that describes a cultural concept often linked with famed tea master Sen no Rikyu. The term is often translated as “for this time only,” “never again,” or “one chance in a lifetime.”***

*Ichigo ichi-e is linked with Zen Buddhism and concepts of transience. The term is particularly associated with the Japanese tea ceremony, and is often brushed onto scrolls which are hung in the tea room. In the context of tea ceremony, ichigo ichi-e reminds participants that each tea meeting is unique.*



*The term is also much repeated in budō (martial ways). It is sometimes used to admonish students who become careless or frequently stop techniques midway to “try again,” rather than moving on with the technique despite the mistake. In a life-or-death struggle, there is no chance to “try again.” Even though techniques may be attempted many times in the dojo, each should be seen as a singular and decisive event. Similarly, in noh theater, performances are only rehearsed together once, a few days before the show, rather than the many times that are typical in the West, this corresponding to the transience of a given show.”*



I am afraid the explanation above is not sufficient to explain the relationship between samurai and tea ceremony. This concept is critical to understand the relationship between those two and it must be explained further. I will add the explanation about how this concept really became in tune with the mind of the samurai in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Japan was going through a warring states period, Sengoku jidai; a time of social upheaval, political intrigue, and nearly constant military conflict that lasted roughly from the middle of the 15th century to the beginning of the 17th century. During this period of nearly 200 years the main island of Japan was filled with wars. Tens of thousands of samurai had to go into battle almost every year. Certainly many were killed and there was no guarantee about their fate or their survival when the wars came so successively. There was a feeling of transience and they felt their life being very fleeting. Instead of becoming ephemeral and to compromise they tried to overcome this by trying to attain calmness in mind by realizing the fact that they were living at that very moment, Ichigo Ichie. It is interesting as this realization or thinking method is something that has some similarity to that among the hippies in the 60's when the US was going through the Vietnam War. Instead of smoking marijuana the samurai went to drinking tea and called Sado, the way of tea or Chanoyu, tea in hot water. Anyway, there are strict manners and a method of conduct in Chanoyu. You are to follow the strict behavior of receiving a cup from the ceremony master with a steady hand and then slowly drink a sip. After drinking a small amount of tea you will return the cup to the ceremony master again with a steady hand. If your mind is not calm this behavior cannot be done in a very smooth and steadily controlled motion. Samurai liked Zen meditation as well to get the concentration and the feeling of non-attachment. But they preferred Chanoyu as going through the ceremony was easier and more fulfilling by having an interaction with the ceremony master. Also the samurai did not know back then the health benefits we know now but they must have felt instinctively the goodness of drinking tea.

*Harvard Health news: SEPTEMBER 2004*

*Although tea drinking has been associated with health benefits for centuries, only in recent years have its medicinal properties been investigated scientifically. The October issue of Harvard Women's Health Watch recognizes the healthy power of tea while helping readers get the most out of their cups.*

*Tea's health benefits are largely due to its high content of flavonoids—plant-derived compounds that are antioxidants. Green tea is the best food source of a group called catechins. In test tubes, catechins are more powerful than vitamins C and E in halting oxidative damage to cells and appear to have other disease-fighting properties. Studies have found an association between consuming green tea and a reduced risk for several cancers, including, skin, breast, lung, colon, esophageal, and bladder.*

*Additional benefits for regular consumers of green and black teas include a reduced risk for heart disease. The antioxidants in green, black, and oolong teas can help block the oxidation of LDL (bad) cholesterol, increase HDL (good) cholesterol and improve artery function. A Chinese study published recently in the Archives of Internal Medicine showed a 46%-65% reduction in hypertension risk in regular consumers of oolong or green tea, compared to non-consumers of tea.*

*The October issue provides a few tips to get the most out of tea-drinking:*

*Drinking a cup of tea a few times a day to absorb antioxidants and other healthful plant compounds. In green-tea drinking cultures, the usual amount is three cups per day. Allow tea to steep for three to five minutes to bring out its catechins. The best way to get the catechins and other flavonoids in tea is to drink it freshly brewed. Decaffeinated, bottled ready-to-drink tea preparations, and instant teas have less of these compounds. Tea can impede the absorption of iron from fruits and vegetables. Adding lemon or milk or drinking tea between meals will counteract this problem.*

In addition, according to the hypnotherapist Sara Maude Brighton, there are definitely some physiological effects of caffeine. She writes in her newsletter;

*The main ingredient in coffee that gives us that boost is caffeine, a central nervous system stimulant. Caffeine is found naturally in tea, chocolate, fizzy drinks and even in pain killers and weight control drugs.*

*Caffeine stimulates the central nervous system by blocking adenosine, a neurotransmitter that normally causes a calming effect in the body. The resulting neural stimulation due*

*to this blockage causes the adrenal glands to release adrenaline, the "fight or flight" hormone. Your heart rate increases, your pupils dilate, your muscles tighten up, and glucose is released into your blood stream for extra energy.*

So the samurai found Chanoyu to be very beneficial both physically and mentally. When they came across with the concept of Ichigo Ichie it certainly hit the core of their psyche.

Now let us look further into the concept of our main subject, Shu Ha Ri. I quote one Japanese explanation from a kenjutsu book, Katsujinken-battodo (Soubunsha Press). I will offer my English translation to the explanation in Japanese.

伝統を受け継ぐ者にとって忘れてはならない、特に武道にとっての教えが「守破離」である。

**Shu Ha Ri is a teaching principle that must not be forgotten by the carrier of the heritage especially in martial arts.**

「守」とは、師や各流派の教えを忠実に守り、それからはずれることのないように精進して身につけよ、という意味である。

**Shu represents a concept that for many years one must follow and adhere to the teachings of his instructor and his style without making any changes or modifications.**

「破」とは、今まで学んで身につけた教えから一步進めて他流の教え、技を取り入れることを心かけ、師から教えられたものにこだわらず、さらに心と技を發展させよ、という意味である。

**Ha means after mastering the teachings from his teacher he must expand what he learned by exposing himself to other styles and teachers. Here he must introduce the other techniques and concepts so that he can improve his physical and mental skills to reach the next level.**

「離」とは、破からさらに修行して、守にとらわれず破も意識せず、新しい世界を拓き、独自のものを生みだせ、という意味である。

**Ri is the final stage where he reaches only after decades of Ha practice. Here he no longer gets influenced by the teachings of his past teachers.**

**He opens his own world and his style.**

「守破離」は単に武道の世界だけの教えではない、学問も経営も技術も、すべてにあてはまる。師に教えられて師に止まっていたのは發展はない、古武道に出発して古武道の中で止まっていたのでは、後継者としての存在価値はない。師をしのぎ、伝統を越え、親を超越して、より高い次元に發展成長してこそ文明の進歩がある。「守破離」とはその意味の言葉である。

**Shu Ha Ri concept does not apply only to the martial arts. It can apply to any education, business and crafts. There is no progress if you stop at the teaching of your teacher. There is no value to the inheritor of Kobudo if he stayed only inside of Kobudo. The advancement of culture comes only when a person exceeds his teacher and parents and develops the traditions to the higher realm. Shu Ha Ri is the concept of this teaching.**

[参照] 活人剣抜刀道、叢文社

Katsujinken-battodo, Soubunsha Press

It is difficult to know the exact number of years and amount of training in each category but my understanding is at least 10 to 15 years should be spent for Shu. For Ha it is more difficult as the value of the additional learning will vary so much as well as the different levels of talent of the practitioners. I would say one must spend at least 30 to 40 years before he can explore the Ri stage. I may be conservative with those required years but I feel those years are needed by the average practitioner like myself. I must be un-talented because I have been practicing Shotokan karate nearly 50 years but yet I do not feel anywhere near Ri stage. I am already 65 years old and I do not know when I will ever be able to reach Ri stage. Of course, for a talented practitioner like late Master Asai probably less than half of the time is required, however, I consider him to be an exception so he should not be the standard. For an average practitioner it is very possible that he may never reach the Ri stage. This is a very important point. Shu and Ha are the stages almost all practitioners can attain but only the talented ones can reach the Ri stage. Just because you spent 50 or 60 years in karate, it does not automatically qualify you to get to the Ri stage. In order for you to be able to do this you must be not only better than your own sensei but all the sensei in Shotokan. If you believe that you are as good or better than Okazaki, Nishiyama, Enoda, Kase, Nakayama and Funakoshi, then I guess you can claim that you are at the Ri stage. This is my definition and I believe this is the way Shu Ha Ri is understood in Japan.

I would like to point out two interesting facts I observe in the karate world in Japan and in the USA. As I am not familiar with the karate world in Europe and other regions, I will limit my comments based on the experiences I had in Japan and the USA where I have been teaching for more than 40 years.

Main stream Shotokan organizations include JKA, JSKA, SKIF, JKS, ISKF and a few others. The situation is very similar with these organizations in Japan and in the US. My experience and observation is that most of the training menu of the practitioners stay in Shu stage, in fact, too long and cannot or do not know how to move on to the next stage of Ha. I came across an interesting saying posted by a Shotokan practitioner on my Facebook.



It goes like this, “A black belt is a white belt who did not give up”. I sort of understand what this statement is trying to say and give credit to an attractive saying. It is true that more than 90% of the white belts quit before they reach shodan. There are many reasons why almost all of the beginners drop out. All of the fault (if there is such a thing) should not fall on the practitioners alone. The responsibility must be carried by the instructors and the organizations. There are, unfortunately, many poor and unqualified instructors who demotivate or discourage the new students. Most of the major organizations have the restrictive policies and show sectionalism.

After 10 or 15 years of karate training, at Shu level, a practitioner probably becomes Nidan or Sandan. At this stage, he should start exploring the Ha level where he would expose himself to not only other instructors but also other karate styles and other kinds of martial arts. But the fact is, those members are not only discouraged but they would be punished if they tried. Yes, punished if one wants to learn and expand his karate. This was one of the main reasons why I resigned from JKA/ISKF. Kancho Kanazawa, SKIF, is very active in Tai Chi so I suspect there is some influence there but as far as I have witnessed from the seminars he has given in 90's and early 2000's I have discovered very little difference from the syllabus of JKA. Some readers are surprised that I included even JKS in the list. It was started by Tetsuhiko Asai in 2000 and I joined the organization in 2002 because it was different. The organization offered a lot more such as Junro kata and Asai style kihon and kumite. However, after the passing of Asai in 2006 the organization started to de-emphasize the Asai addition and went backward and its syllabus became similar to that of JKA. That was the main reason for me to resign from that organization in 2009. When I introduce Asai kata to the main stream practitioners I get two types of reactions. One is positive and they appreciate the different body movements that are required in Asai kata. The other group rejects the kata and says, “JKA's 26 kata are already too many and I have no room for any more.” I agree if this is coming from Shodan, Nidan and even Sandan. But when you are Yondan and above, don't you think it is about time to feel it is your responsibility to get into Ha? I seriously hope all the senior instructors will be brave enough to expand their experience and perspectives.



On the other extreme I see some practitioners in their 30's and 40's start their own styles. This may not be a common occurrence but what I see often is the lack of patience by many American practitioners to stay in Shu stage for the necessary period of minimum 10 to 15 years. There are several different reasons and causes. One is that the American people are very creative. In other words, they want to do their own thing. This good trait can backfire if he did not stick long enough with the basics and the original teaching. He will have either none, or a weak foundation to which he can build anything credible or meaningful. Secondly, for an American, 10 or 15 years is a very long time and it will be extremely difficult for him to stick to the same thing for that long. His country's history itself is only 200 years or so when compared to that of Japan which is much longer than 20 centuries. Thirdly, the American society is highly mobile. I limit my analysis only with the US society as I am not familiar with the socio-economics of Europe. Most of the US citizens continuously move due to school and work related reasons. According to Ask.com the average Americans move every 5 years. In Japan it is not rare to see a family living not only in the same city but in the very same house for many generations.

Fourthly, “change” or something new is good in the US with much less respect for the traditions. So, for those reasons American practitioners have difficulty in staying at the same dojo or even in the same style even if that dojo or the style offers a high level of karate training. I have come across so many Soke (Grandmaster) in the US karate world.

This is my overall impression and it is definitely not conclusive or definitive to all the dojos and organizations. I am speaking of a general trend that I have witnessed when I visited many different dojos and tournaments in Japan and the USA. They were mostly Shotokan but some were other styles.

### **Conclusion:**

I see a serious problem with the practitioners who cut corners and try to get into the Ha stage prematurely. I can understand that trying new things are exciting and in a way educational. However, I still say to these people that their progress will stop in the middle of Ha stage as they did not perfect their foundation, Shu stage and they will never be able to reach the true Ri stage. While you are below Nidan level you need to be patient and focus all your time and energy in perfecting the kihon and kata of that school or style. On the other hand, I see a bigger problem with the practitioners of large main stream organizations. Even if my advice to explore happens to reach them their hands are sort of tied by their organizations' rules and policies. I was one of them for almost 40 years. In the first 20 years I did not even see the problem. In the last 20 years I tried to forget about the problem and stayed isolated but this was not good. In the end I almost gave up on karate. In fact, I stayed away from karate totally for 4 years and during that period I did not wear a gi even once. The big change came when I participated in one of the seminars by Asai sensei. It took me a year before I could resign from ISKF/JKA but I am glad that I did. I am nowhere near Ri stage but I am truly enjoying my freedom and the excitement of Ha, exploring stage. If you have spent 15 years in those organizations and if you are totally happy with your karate then there is no need to listen to me. However, if you feel you have reached your plateau after practicing the same thing for 15 years and you feel you need to explore and to expand, I want to send these words to you, “be brave”. There is a bigger world outside the organization and a style. Take the bold next step and explore and learn. I guarantee that this will help and improve your karate. Even if it does not improve your karate, you've lost nothing. If you had stayed in the same rut you would only remain there. This is my sincere hope that more Shotokan practitioners will wet their feet and see that it is not a criminal act to experience Ha stage.

押忍

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## 第十三章

# TENKETSU JUTSU

## 点穴術

Tetsuhiko Asai was a true genius in martial arts and his mastery of karate was far beyond what we know of Shotokan karate. His story has been told by many and there are many video clips to show his amazing techniques of karate and other martial arts including weapons. Today I want to share a story about one technique he had but it has never been told in the western world and not much even in Japan. This is his mastery of Tenketsu jutsu. The readers should not be embarrassed if they have never heard of this term before. In fact, this word cannot be found in Wikipedia, so you can safely say the word is not “known” in the western world. This technique is also called kyusho jutsu which may sound more familiar to some of the readers. However, many readers will probably recognize a Chinese pronunciation, Dim mak. This term enjoys a long explanation in Wikipedia. Well known it may be but at the same time, it also has a not so reputable history in the US which was started by a certain American character, Count Dante in the 60's.



I want to emphasize that I am a realist and do not believe in mystic beliefs and other so called “mumbo jumbo”. Before I dive into Tenketsu let me share an experience while on my search for the extra ordinary martial arts techniques. In the 90's I learned about Master Nishino who was an expert in the area of Ki. He had such strong Ki he could flip people around with his ki without touching them. I read all the books he had written and purchased a few video tapes (VHS then). His performance in the videos truly amazed me as he could throw people (not a few but 10 and 20 people simultaneously) left and right. Some of the people flip and jump as though they were blasted by an explosive or a bomb. In the video, he could easily knock a person down without touching. This technique is called To-Ate, To means far and Ate means hit so it literally means hitting someone from afar.

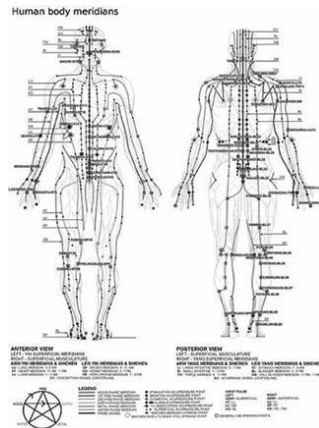
Here is a YouTube video tape of a demonstration against high school students:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RLBa0ie1T-Q&feature=related>



Interesting, isn't it? I am a believer of the existence of Ki but I did not believe one can have such a strong Ki enough to knock down another individual. So by viewing these demonstrations in the mid-90's I believed in his ability and wished to learn the technique. I concluded the technique of To-Ate would be an ultimate technique of the karate punch. I found a job in Japan in 1997 and I moved back to Tokyo to live there for nearly three years. As soon as I moved to Tokyo I joined Nishino dojo in Shibuya. The training fee was extremely expensive but I took two classes weekly. As I expected Master Nishino could flip hundreds of students at his will just like in the video above. It was amazing to watch him in action and very impressive. The actions of the students were not fake but genuine as they were regular citizens of all ages and occupations. They were paying hundreds of dollars each month to learn Ki so there is no reason why they would pretend to be flipped around. One very unfortunate thing was that there was only one student Master Nishino could not throw or move with his Ki. That was me. The funny thing is the students looked at me as though something was wrong with me. I was totally disappointed as I really wanted to feel his Ki and experience the Ki flip without being touched. Though I tried very hard, I did not feel anything at all when he pointed his hand or hands at me. He even touched me and pushed my arm in the

Ki exchange form (my forearm and his forearm are touched and crossed as done in kung fu push hand exercise. He got frustrated and told me I was too stiff and resisting his Ki. I did not argue with him but my situation was completely opposite. I was totally relaxed and was more than willing to be flipped around. Master Nishino came to the dojo once a week. On that day all the students lined up in front of him to receive his Ki. After finding he could not move me, he changed his days at the dojo. He came only on the days when I was not scheduled. I changed my dates so I could be in his class. To make the story short, in the end Master Nishino asked me to stop coming to his class. He told me I was too nervous and my mind was too stiff. So, I quit the school and gave up learning to-ate technique after two years of training at his dojo. I can say that his technique was not universal thus I concluded that it was not something I wanted to learn. With this experience, I remain as a non-believer of mystical power or technique. I certainly had that attitude when I visited Asai in the early 2000's.



Before I talk about the experience with Asai, let's look into the definition of Tenketsu or Dim mak so we will have a better understanding of what this technique is about. Dim mak is written in Chinese as 點脈. The first character, 點 means a spot and the second, 脈 means a pulse. Wikipedia translates it as "press artery" or pressure points. This technique is also written as 点穴 and it is pronounced as Tenketsu in Japanese. The first character, 点 is the simplified version of 點 with the same meaning, a spot or a point. The second character, 穴 means a hole or a tunnel. As you can guess its history can be traced back to acupuncture. Tenketsu technique is also called Kyusho jutsu, in Japan. In martial arts, it is explained that this technique is used to attack pressure or vital points. The word Dim mak was introduced to America in the 60's and became well known in American pop culture in the 80's according to Wikipedia. However, most of the practitioners or the masters were fakes and this word almost became a joke. Many people believe this only exists in a fairy tale or is simply mumbo jumbo. I want to share the actual experience of the art that was performed by Asai and it is up to the readers to decide if such a technique in fact exists or not.

Tenketsu technique has never been published widely in the western world. In fact, it is not known too much even in Japan. Luckily, a major Japanese magazine, Karatedo has published an article on Asai and his technique of Tenketsu in its February 2002 issue. The translation of this article can be found on the JKS website. The information of Asai is sadly no longer promoted or emphasized by the JKS. This translation of the article is deeply hidden in the Japanese section of the website so it will be extremely difficult for the non-Japanese speaking practitioners to find it. If you are interested you can read the translation of the entire article on the following website: <http://www.jks.jp/japanese/data-001.htm>.

Below is the section of the article that is related to Tenketsu technique.

**Karatedo Magazine (Japan) Febuary 2002 issue**

**What is Tenketsu Jutsu?**





Sensei's technique is very deep. One example of the depth of his knowledge is in his understanding and application of the Tenketsu Jutsu. Tenketsu Jutsu is the techniques of attacking vital points (acupressure points) on the body. In China these points have been used for generations in martial arts, Chigun and holistic medicine. In Karate, however, there are some points that Holistic medicine is not aware of. In Martial Arts, attacking the vital points can cause fainting, numbness and inflict pain on your opponent. He learned this technique in China. These techniques were not taught openly, based their dangerous outcome, however, we asked Asai Sensei to give us a special introduction and explanation of these techniques.

In the human body there are 365 joints, 72 "numbness points", which can cause paralysis and 36 points which cause death. In addition to this, you must know that there is blood and "Chi" (energy) circulating in the body. With this said, now we can introduce to you this technique. If you attack with your finger a certain point at a certain time, the circulation of both blood and Chi will stop, causing numbness or death to your opponent.

Also, from long ago human beings have had natural bio-rhythms. Everyone wakes up in the mornings, sleeps at night, and eats when they are hungry. Depending on the time of day, the blood circulation can vary. Therefore, when you attack a certain point at a certain time, with a certain amount of strength, you interrupt the human bio-rhythm. And then, just like you turn off a switch, the body rhythm is turned off, and that point of the body starts to decay. The outcome of the attack depends on the strength of the attack.

To the lack of luck to some people, including Martial Art competitors, this type of attack can occur during normal training or at competitions, having the same deadly results without the real intention of the attacker. From a non-medical point of view, this outcome is simply due to the fact that the competitor or trainee was hit at a certain point of his body at a certain time of day which caused the interruption of the normal flow of blood and Chi in his or her body. This can also happen to an unlucky person walking down the street who accidentally slips and falls hitting the ground with certain strength, hitting a certain point in his body at a certain time, making him or her unable to move. In addition, the opposite of this is also true, where this theory can be used for healing if you study it.

However, it is important to point out that the study of Tenketsu Jutsu can be extremely dangerous. In the past this knowledge had been kept secret, only taught to a selected few. Its name had often been changed, to perpetuate its secrecy.

If you want to study Tenketsu Jutsu, you must first study the following 8 points.

1. One must know where the pressure points are. (Place and the organs they are connected to.)
2. One must know blood Chi circulation pathways and bio-rhythms.
3. One must know Tenketsu Jutsu theory.
4. One must study finger techniques (Tenketsu Jutsu mainly uses finger strikes)
5. One must master finger sticking techniques.



6. One must train one's vision. (You must train to detect the pressure point of your moving target in the dark)
7. One must be able to attack from a long distance.
8. One must learn how to attack, even when the outline of one's opponent is not clear, or when something is in between you and the opponent.

Of course, even if one's opponent moves, one must find the pressure points even if in the dark. By merely using one's eyes this is very difficult; therefore one must use all one's senses to find the target. In order to perfect this, Asai sensei made a life size model of a person and marked all the vital points on it. Using this he was able to practice Tenketsu Jutsu from a variety of angles and positions, not only using his eyes, but his whole consciousness.

In addition to that, he uses the shortest and fastest way to hit his target. During Karate demonstrations, Asai Sensei does not hit these vital points, but instead he hits muscle areas on the body of his demonstration subject.

If you perform the Tenketsu Jutsu Technique on an opponent and use only one finger, you will hurt yourself eventually because of overusing your finger. Therefore, to maximize the efficiency of your finger attack, you must know when your opponent is at their weakest moment so that you would not have to utilize much force. Therefore you must be able to catch the moment when your opponent is at their weakest point. You have to get the maximum effect using the minimum amount of power. For example, when humans inhale, they are at a weak moment. If you notice, a good attack is performed at the moment of exhale. Therefore, attacking your opponent at their moment of inhale, will require less strength and power from the attacker, and still result in the maximum effects.

When you attack the pressure points, not only strike, but also twist your strike 45 degrees clockwise or vibrate your finger, at the moment of impact. You can choose from a variety of techniques depending on the point you are attacking.

Sensei Asai says that Tenketsu Jutsu not only has techniques for attacking vital points, but also it has methods for attacking the pathways that connect these vital points. The Center of the front part of the body is called: "Nimiyaku". The Center of the back of the body is called: Tokumyaku. Using the knife edge (Shuto) of the hand and the forearm of your hand (Naiwan) you can cut the line of Chi and blood circulation, and the outcome you desire. (Strong, weak, deep, or shallow)

Review:

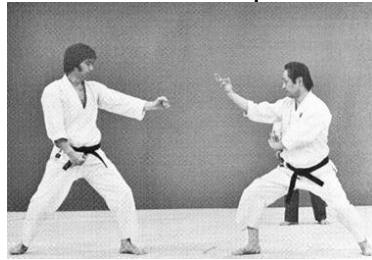
Tenketsu Jutsu technique believes that the human body has a pathway of Chi flowing down the center of the body. This is called the "Ninyaku". It is also believed that there is a pathway of Chi flowing down the back, called the "Tokumyaku". If these lines are attacked, then it is easy to stop the bio-rhythms and circulation of one's opponent. This can be done with shuto or a cutting action with the open hand.

(END)

I believe that article in 2002 was the first time he announced publicly that he practiced Tenketsu jutsu. Let me now share the experience I had with Asai in 2004 with this very interesting and unique technique of his.

During the several years before his passing in 2006, I used to visit him monthly and had many meetings with Sensei in his office in Shinbashi (two stations away from Tokyo station). We talked about many subjects, not only about karate but also various cultures and nature of the

people. He was interested in how people think and why people act the way they do. He said he was never interested in business and making money. He said he was interested in psychology, sociology and even history. If he did not pick up karate he could have become a school teacher. We expanded our talk to the difference between Japanese and Chinese.

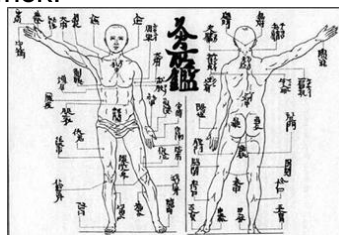


He had a great respect for the Chinese culture and what it offered. He said he learned a lot when he was living in Taiwan in his early days of training. He was sent there by the JKA just as Kanazawa, Nishiyama and Okazaki were sent to the US and Enoeda, Kase and Shirai were to Europe. He met his future wife while he was living in Taiwan. Her brother, Mr. Chen, happened to be a kung fu master of White Crane style. Mrs. Asai told me many stories about her brother and Sensei exchanging different techniques. This process made his karate very unique and I am sure many readers already know about this.

Though he did not tell me exactly where and from whom he learned this art he certainly knew the technique as he demonstrated it on me. I cannot remember exactly on which day it was but it was the winter of 2004 as I had my suit on and carried my over coat. Here is the summary of the extraordinary experience I encountered on that day.

As usual I visited his business office in Shinbashi near Tokyo station one morning. Asai seemed to have special interest in Latin America so he always wanted to know how the JKS was doing in Latin American countries. So I gave him the update as quickly as possible as on that day I had to leave in one hour because of my other appointments. I wanted to finish the update quickly so that I would have time to ask him some questions. On that day I wanted to ask him about Tenketsu as I got hold of a copy of this particular issue of Karatedo a few weeks before my visit to Japan. He was featured in Karatedo (Feb 2002 issue, per photo) and the article included his ability in Kyusho jutsu or Tenketsu. I know there are some critical points in our body so hitting such a spot is effective. However, I was skeptical about the techniques such as paralyzing a person or hurting someone with a small tap or light grabbing or pinching.

I had to be frank and expressed my skepticism to him. He said with a little smile "So . . . you are a non-believer." He laughed and continued, "You came all the way from California. Let me show you a little demonstration." This was exactly what I wanted but I did not expect he would offer this. So I quickly answered yes but right after that I regretted a little. In my head a thought went through very quickly, "Oh no it will be painful". With a smile he told me to take off my jacket. He said "I can do it with your jacket on but it will be easier without it." I was nervous but I did not want to show my fear so I followed his direction. He said "OK first let's shake hands." I was not sure why he wanted to do this so I simply extended my right hand. Instead of grabbing my hand he quickly pinched me between my thumb and index finger. The pain was indescribable. He totally had control over me with his two fingers. He raised his hand high and lowered it and dragged me around the room at his will and with ease. I simply could not do anything but follow him. I was impressed but I figured that anyone could do the same if he could pinch very hard. Asai knew what I was thinking so he said with a smile, "I know anyone can do this and this is only a party trick."



He continued, "Let me show you the real thing." I was a little scared but I was more curious about what I would experience. He told me to stand and relax. He faced me and extended both of his arms towards my face and put his hands on my shoulders. I was nervous so he smiled and said "Relax! This time it will not hurt you." He told me to bring up my arms and then to

bring them down so I did that. So what was that for? Then, I felt a pressure on my neck. With his right hand he was holding my left shoulder and with his left hand he was pressing on the right side of my neck. One of his fingers of his left hand pressed a little harder on my neck so I felt a very small pain there, like a needle prick. He told me to lift my arms up again so I tried. Would you believe that I could not? Not only could I not move my arms but I could not turn my head either. My upper body was “frozen” or “locked”. It is hard to describe exactly how I felt with my body at that moment. I felt no pain and I could move my fingers, and my lower body. I could see and talk but I had no control from the neck down to the elbows. I felt the shoulder joints were locked and that part of my body was in a cast. I told him I could not move. He said “Yes that is exactly what this technique would do.” He said with a somber face, “Come back tomorrow and I will fix you then.” Even though I suspected he was just joking, I got in a small panic. Can you imagine trying to conduct a business meeting in this condition? It was not funny at all so I begged Sensei to put me back to normal. This time he smiled and asked “Are you sure?” so I told him “Most definitely yes!” Now I think it was interesting how he set me back. Instead of pressing my neck again, he used both open hands and hit my shoulders, my sides and arms several times very quickly. It was like pounding the air out of my body. He did this a few times and the poundings themselves were pretty hard. The middle of my neck and shoulder muscles had some jerks and spasms then I got my mobility back.



Apparently there are two kinds of Tenketsu techniques. One is soft which he demonstrated. It is called soft because the technique is not based on hitting a body part but rather with pressing of the fingers or different parts of the hand. When a finger is being used there are various methods also. When he pressed my neck he used the finger tips but I hear different knuckles just like in karate techniques are also used depending on the parts of the body a technique is applied. The other kind is better known and that is applied by a hit by many different parts of a hand or an arm. If it is a strike he said the most important thing for a technique to be effective is not power but rather the exact spot and an angle of application. He said he needed to be very careful when he gave a demonstration in a tournament. He was well known for his whip hand technique using his shuto and teisho. When he performed he was really hitting the opponent in the neck and the groin area. Of course we all know that he needed to be careful with the groin area but he said he had to be more careful with the neck area as he could literally knock the demo partner unconscious or paralyze him permanently if applied in a certain way. He also strengthened his fingertips by thrusting his fingers in a bowl of sand and beans. With his one finger jab he, of course, could blind you but he also told me that he could hit a tenketsu point to cause great pain but also paralysis, temporary or permanent. I did not experience the hard tenketsu techniques but certainly I did not volunteer for one.

I, of course, wanted to learn this technique but he told me that it was too dangerous to pass it on. He told me that he has not found anyone trustworthy to hand it down to. That was 2004, two years before his passing. He also did not have any uchi deshi (private apprentice), though a few people wrongfully claim that. He told me several times that he had not created any uchi deshi including the Japanese and certainly no foreign practitioners.

I must assume the very unfortunate consequence that this art was never handed down to anyone from him. Whether you wish to believe this art or call it mumbo jumbo, all I can tell you is that just like many of the kata he created, his Tenketsu technique is forever gone with him when he passed in 2006.

押忍



**"Fusen Ji Sho"**

**Fusen: Not fighting, Ji: Results, Sho: Victory**

# EPILOGUE

## エピログ

### THE LAST SAMURAI

#### 最後の侍

We want to share this picture of Asai sensei in the final overseas seminar he had in 2006. This one was taken in early July approximately one month before his passing on August 15th. You may be shocked with this picture if you happen to know Sensei and you are familiar with how he looked. Indeed, he looked very thin and sick. He was always a thin and fit person but he lost more than 10kg after a major surgery in the winter of that year. He was barely 40kg in this picture.



Line up in Los Cabos (Asai sensei's left shoulder is "touching" the right shoulder of the author, Yokota)

I debated with myself whether I should show this picture as we want to remember him as a healthy and active karate-ka. In the end, I decided to show this picture to the public as I feel it is my obligation to share the story of what actually happened here. I was the coordinator and the organizer of the seminar in 2006 so I know the whole story behind this last trip Sensei took. This seminar was planned towards the end of June extending to early July with him travelling all the way to New York first then on to Los Cabos Mexico. The big mystery of this trip is that no one could answer the following question; why did he take this long journey that certainly took his life? Prior to the trip his doctor advised him not to go. By learning this in mid-June, I immediately cancelled the seminar. So, Sensei could have rested at home and I am sure that would have added many months and possibly years to his life. But he did not. Why? It is my wish to reveal this story so that his actions will not remain a mystery. Sensei was an awesome figure when he was in his prime just as many other JKA instructors. But he was different from the others and I can tell you he was one of a kind. By reading this story the readers will discover why I call him the Last Samurai.

Let us travel back to June of 2006. I made another monthly business visit to Tokyo in the middle of June. I was working for a US software firm selling an IT solution to the utility companies like Tokyo Electric and Tokyo Gas. So, the job brought me back to Japan almost almost every month and I certainly took advantage of this to visit Sensei. The company never knew this but I used to check his availability in advance then I would schedule my trip to Japan on the days when he was in town. It was a hot and humid day in June when I visited Sensei's office in Shinbashi in the center of Tokyo. It was actually raining as we were in the middle of tsuyu (rain) season. I was supposed to wear a tie but I remember carrying it in my briefcase as it was too humid to do so. I always visited him in his business office because he was available to meet me one on one. It is impossible to do so at his dojo in Sugamo in the outskirts of Tokyo. Sensei never gave a private lesson to anyone so it was always in the form of a business meeting when I visited him. We met in a conference room and we talked as long as he was available, sometimes hours. He had a small trading firm that was involved in commodity trading between Taiwan and Japan. He was Shacho, president, but he told me he had nothing to do except to put his seal on some of the documents. He was quite free in the morning so I used to visit his office at 9 or 10AM. I visited his office on one Monday morning in June and strangely I missed him. Sensei's secretary told me that he had to go to a hospital for a check-

up today so he suddenly became unavailable. This was very unusual so I asked her if he was ok. I knew he had a major surgery in the winter so I suspected something bad. She said "No he went to the doctor to get an approval for the upcoming overseas trip". This was the US/Mexico seminar that I was hosting.

I just realized that his doctor had prohibited him from taking an overseas trip that would require long air flights, time difference, different weather, etc., etc. I did not know he was still so sick, so I told her that we were happy to postpone or cancel the seminar which was scheduled in the last week of June and the first week of July. She said that would be a good idea as she did not think he was in a good enough condition to take a two week seminar trip to the Americas. I told her that I would come back on the following day just to give my respect to Sensei and an update of my activities in the US. In fact that very night, I called my contacts in three different locations; NY, Texas and Los Cabos Mexico, to inform them of my decision to postpone the seminar. After learning of Sensei's condition, all three contacts understood the situation and gladly accepted my decision.

I visited his office the next morning and found him there. He was wearing a suit with a tie which he always did in his office. I used to tell him he looked very professional, he came back with a joke saying "I hate this monkey suit but I have to wear it. Otherwise, the guests think I am only a janitor." Then he used to laugh aloud. So, that morning he was dressed well as usual but I was shocked to see him for two reasons. One is he had lost more weight in the last one or two months. He was a thin person; less than 60kg but what I saw on that day was literally a skin and bone figure of Sensei. I said to myself, "My God, what had happened to him?" As he sat there with his back straight, he was slightly swaying which never happened before. The second reason for my surprise was his look. He looked extremely upset and almost angry. Of course, I did not know why. I never could imagine he was upset with me so I thought he just had a bad day. During the usual greeting he said nothing which was unusual. After my greeting I started to tell him that we were happy to postpone the seminar and the three contacts in the US and Mexico were in full agreement with me. At that moment he almost screamed at me asking, "Who decided to postpone it?" I said, "I did as I heard about your condition." He told me with a much quieter but more authoritative voice, "This is MY health and I know about it the best. You must not make a decision about my trip and seminar." I quickly apologized that I made a decision without consulting him but I was very much determined that I had made the right decision so I continued saying, "Asai sensei, we are not canceling the event. We will do this in the fall when the weather is better. You seem to have lost a lot of weight so please gain back some weight and rest during the hot summer. You will be in better shape to make a long trip to the US. Besides, all of us will worry about your health if you visit us now." I thought my comments made much sense as we cared about his health first. He came back to me with the same authoritative way of talking, "I have agreed to visit the US and Mexico. When I make a commitment I always deliver. If you cancel or change this trip I will never visit you again." Well with this statement what could I say? I told him I understood and we would hold the seminar according to the original plan. But I told him we would do this under one condition. I asked him to bring at least one assistant instructor with him so he can watch over him during his trip to the US. I wanted to travel with him but my work appointments were already set for the following week and it was impossible to do so. He agreed to my request. The assistant instructors were also concerned about the overseas trip and they were against the idea. So, two of them volunteered to accompany him. I felt a little more comfortable knowing two young guys were tagging along so that Sensei did not need to carry his bag or walk much as they told me that they would get a wheel chair at the airport. I called my three contacts that night and told them that we need to forget the postponement and we would maintain the original plan. They were very happy as the seminar was only one or two weeks away and it is very difficult to change the dates and re-book the training sites. They would have fewer participants too if you change the dates. They were also happy that two more Japanese instructors would be with Sensei.



The Asai party took off from Japan as originally scheduled and their first destination was New York City. I really wanted to join them but due to my work schedule I could not do so. I called the host and spoke with the assistant instructors to check on Sensei. They told me that he was ok after the flight so I was relieved with the news as I was worried about the long flight from Tokyo to New York. At the end of that week they would fly to Los Angeles to meet me. Then we would fly to their final destination, Los Cabos Mexico together. I took a few days off from work and joined them at LAX on Thursday to spend the long weekend with them. When I saw him at LAX he looked very weak and tired. The assistant instructors told me that his condition got worse as they traveled on from New York to Texas then finally to Los Cabos which is located on a peninsula west of mainland Mexico.

It was obvious the tiredness was wearing him down. He went to bed as soon as we arrived in the hotel. It was a good thing that we had a full day to rest. He was in bed almost all day but he got up and joined us at dinner. On Saturday, at lunch time we went to his room. We walked in and found him in bed. He told us that he could not get up on his own. We had to help him sit up first. He was totally exhausted and too weak to stand up. We were so afraid of his health we called the local doctor to give him a quick examination.

The doctor came and told us that he must not be moved. He needed to rest until his departure date on Monday if he wanted to go home then. When the translator, the representative of JKS (Japan Karate Shotorenmei) in Los Cabos told him what the doctor said, Sensei said he would rest in the afternoon but he was determined to go to the training site that evening. After hearing this reply the doctor said he would not guarantee his life if he did this. Sensei said it is ok even if he died during the seminar. The doctor gave him a few shots as he was getting weak and dehydrated and left the room shaking his head showing he could not believe his patient. That evening it took almost one hour for him to get ready to leave for the training. We had to hold him as he tried to walk from his room to the car.



Departure at Los Cabos Airport

At the training site he was too weak to teach the class, so he let one of his assistants run the class. He sat in a chair for a few hours all through both classes we had that night. However, he forced himself to make a line up with him at the front.

He showed the commitment that he would visit and teach his karate. He also knew that he would not be able to visit the US and Mexico if he had postponed it. He knew this trip was not good for his health but he wanted to do it. He did the same thing on Sunday and left us on

Monday. We traveled together to Los Angeles where we separated. As he slowly walked to his plane, I bowed deeply to show my respect to him for showing me the dedication and true commitment. After returning to Japan I heard that he was not resting as he participated in the All Japan Championship at the end of July despite everyone asking him to skip it so he could rest. He watched all the events and he collapsed right after the end of the event. Since that time he was in a coma and never regained consciousness until his passing on August 15th.

I knew he was in the hospital so I called the office almost daily in August. I was hoping he would regain consciousness and his health but that did not happen. He did not give his body enough rest and he was running his life faster than his body could maintain. When I made a call to his office on August 15th the secretary gave me the shocking news of his passing. He was only 71 years old. We needed him for many more years. He had too many things to pass down to his students but he is gone forever.

I learned about 30 Asai ryu kata from him but he knew and practiced over 100 kata thus a majority of Asai ryu kata might have died with him. Not only his kata, there are other arts that were lost. I wrote another chapter on his expertise in Tenketsu jutsu. He was also an expert in several weapons such as bo, nunchaku and kyusetsuben (9 section whip chain). They are also gone with him.

When I received this painful news on August 15th, I must confess that I experienced a serious feeling of guilt. I said to myself "He could have lived longer if I had not invited him this summer" and my thought continued "I really should have postponed that seminar even if he got angry with me and kicked me out of his office. Then he may be still alive now". This thought stayed on my mind every day and haunted me terribly.



A few months later I had a chance to visit his house in the outskirts of Tokyo to pay my respect to his widow. As a Japanese tradition she had a home portable shrine of Sensei to which I prayed and I apologized to him. I spent a few hours talking to Mrs. Asai and I apologized to her. She was surprised and asked why. I spent some minutes explaining why I had deep regret and I blamed myself for what had happened to Sensei. I was overwhelmed with emotions as some tears rolled out of my eyes. By seeing this, she probably felt sorry and told me that I could not have done any differently even if I had tried. She said "Yokota sensei, do not blame yourself. No one could have changed the outcome. I know that once my husband decides no one can change his mind. He was not afraid of dying and he loved his karate more than his life. I suspect he actually wanted to die on the training floor in NYC." She brought my closure. I no longer have to feel guilty for inviting Sensei to the US and hosting the event that definitely shortened his life.



Asai sensei's grave in Tokyo

Now I believe he most likely thought it was not only acceptable but desirable for him if he had died in the US or Mexico while he was giving his last seminar. I am afraid most of the senior instructors in Japan have lost the honor and samurai spirit. They would not risk their life in teaching karate and cannot show samurai spirit. Many of them are more interested in making money and increasing their political power. Asai sensei demonstrated samurai spirit though it shortened his life. He showed us he kept his promise and taught karatedo until the last days of



his life. As far as I am concerned I do not see anyone else in the Shotokan world who is like him. This is why I say he was the last Samurai.

I am truly honored that I could be there with him in the last seminar. All those who were in the Los Cabos training in 2006 must also consider that they were very lucky that they could experience the samurai deed by the greatest master of Shotokan who was indeed the last Samurai.





10<sup>th</sup> Dan Diploma awarded by JKS in 2006



His nickname, "Thunder Storm" will live forever.

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